Cat and mouse?

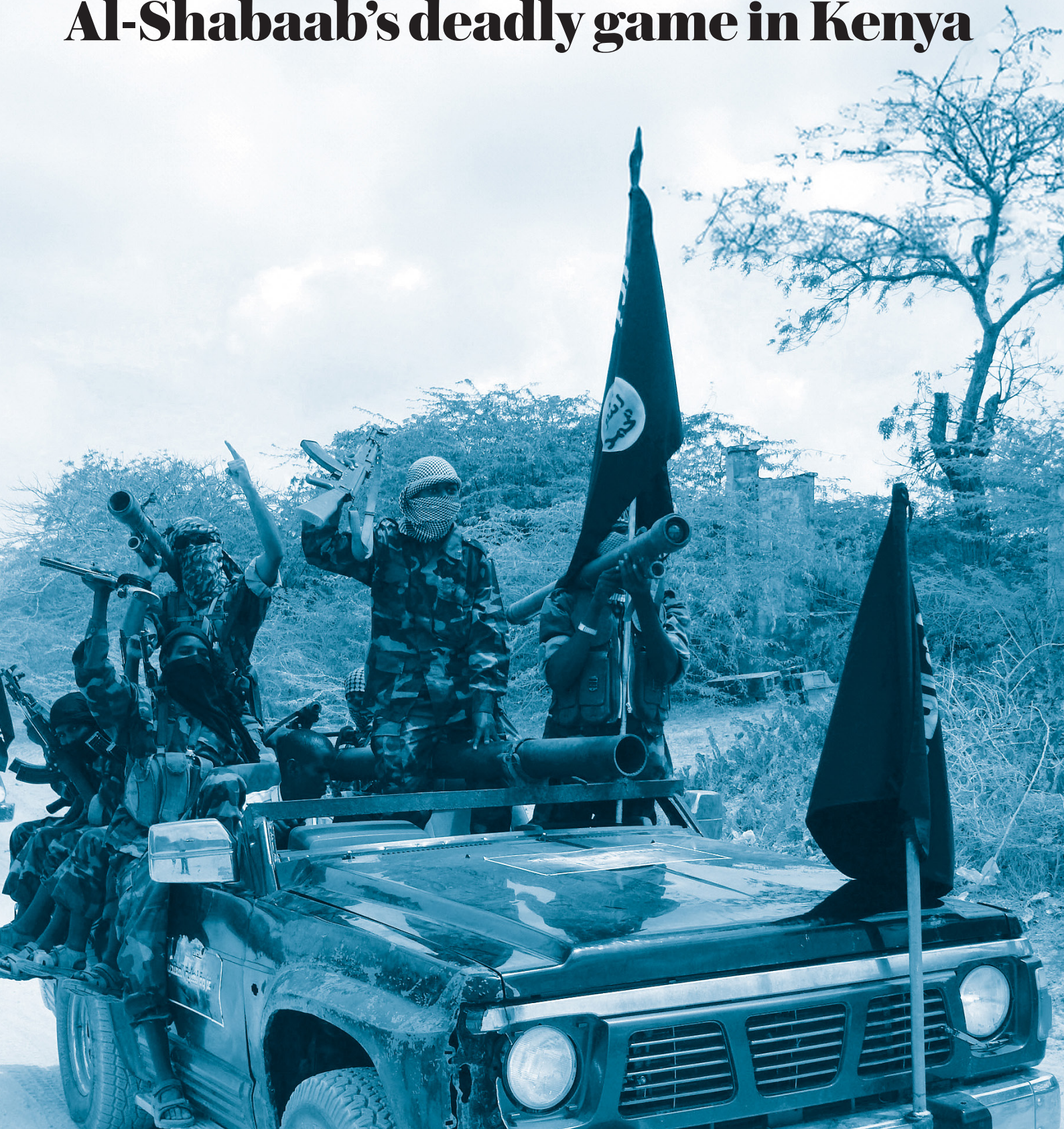## Al-Shabaab's deadly game in Kenya

Cat and mouse?
Al-Shabaab's deadly game in Kenya

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INTRODUCTION

The terrorist group intensifies its operations in the Lamu area as efforts by authorities to shore up security at home and abroad fail to materialize

'The way people are slaughtered like chickens here during Al-Shabaab attacks is disturbing our minds' — Shadrack Njuguna, a 75-year-old resident of Lamu county, Kenya

In the shadow of Boni Forest in Kenya's Lamu County, an area on the border with Somalia where vast farmlands meet dense woodland, a story of terror, resilience and the urgent need for security reevaluation is unfolding.

This report draws on firsthand accounts of survivors, grieving relatives, local politicians and police officers to highlight a concerning trend, as the Somali-based Islamist militant group Al-Shabaab intensifies its attacks in this region.

The risks have grown during the current conflict between Hamas and Israel. Kenyan authorities have warned of the potential for Al-Shabaab attacks in "support" of Hamas following the Palestinian militant group's assault on Israel.

In recent months more than 30 Kenyan security officers have been killed by improvised explosive devices[1].

The Boni Forest, once a rich coastal ecosystem, has been transformed into a war zone, a stronghold for Al-Shabaab militants. The region, already known for the frequent attacks there, has become even more volatile and the forest, extending to the Somali border, serves as a launchpad for the extremists' operations.

The transformation of this internationally important ecosystem into a terrorist haven began when Al-Shabaab set up training bases there in 2012 in response to the deployment of Kenyan soldiers in Somalia. The forest gained strategic importance to Al-Shabaab, in particular Jaysh Ayman fighters, the mainly Kenyan recruits who have extensive

> **The Boni Forest, once a rich coastal ecosystem, has been transformed into a war zone**

knowledge of the region and use the cover of the forest to target military and police forces along key operational routes.

The woodland has also provided a safe space for training militants who sneak back into Somalia across the porous border during dry seasons. Attacks in the area have continued despite the efforts of the military, as soldiers find it challenging to combat militants in the dense forest without armored support. Residents of local communities that once relied on the forest for their livelihoods are now bearing the brunt of the violence.

This situation highlights the complex and long-standing security challenges in the region, where members of Al-Shabaab exploit porous borders, community dynamics and the dense woodland cover to wage guerrilla warfare against security forces. Efforts to address this issue have been complicated by political networks and local conflicts.

Analysts believe the recent escalation in violence is a reaction to counteroffensives by the authorities in Somalia. This has driven

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militants to seek refuge in Kenya, taking advantage of the permeable 700 kilometer border between the countries, which poses a formidable security challenge.

In the midst of this crisis, local politicians are calling for empowered communities to take a more active role in reporting suspicious activities and to resist the tendency to succumb to fear.

Evidence of particularly brutal attacks by Al-Shabaab on farmers deep in the forest can be found in the charred remains of homes and harrowing accounts of survivors, including the widows, parents and grandparents of those who have fallen victim.

For the preparation of this report, locals shared their stories of death and survival. Some of them had narrowly escaped murder at the hands of an extremist group that rarely takes hostages. Its members reputedly select people to guide them through the farmlands, only to execute them later.

Even as interviews for this report were due to begin early one morning, it emerged that

an attack had taken place overnight in an area that had not previously been attacked. In this case, the locals had managed to escape and security forces were trying to locate them.

Most of the attacks target farms that were established by locals after clearing parts of the forest. They are subdivided into several units, many of which are accessible mainly by motorcycle, and only police and military vehicles are capable of reaching some of the most remote farms close to the forest.

In dense woods, less than 10 kilometers from the forest, bullet holes in the walls of a school bear witness to the horrors endured by the people of the region.

BACKGROUND

Officially, Al-Shabaab promotes a form of Salafi jihadism with transnational goals, which links Somali nationalist causes (mainly in Somalia, Kenya and Ethiopia) and local grievances with the struggles of Muslims worldwide.

Al-Shabaab's perception of Kenya as an adversary intensified notably after Kenyan military forces entered Somalia in October 2011[2]. Since then, the group has accused Kenyan forces of various atrocities in Somalia, further fueling the animosity.

However, Al-Shabaab also view Kenya as being fundamentally weak. The group believes the war has negatively affected the country's economy and that it lacks the military capabilities and "mental fortitude" to sustain a prolonged war.

In its operations outside of Somalia, Al-Shabaab has consistently designated Kenya as a primary target. This strategic focus is underscored by a series of major attacks on Kenyan soil[3].

The first significant incident occurred at Westgate Mall in Nairobi in 2013, where Al-Shabaab militants staged a four-day siege. The assault resulted in the loss of 67 lives and left more than 175 people injured.

The following year, the town of Mpeketoni was the scene of another attack as militants targeted a trading center. The assault, which included strikes on a police station, hotels and a bank, claimed the lives of at least 48 people.

The tragic events continued in 2015 with an assault on Garissa University College[4]. Al-Shabaab militants mercilessly attacked the institution, killing 147 people. Disturbingly,

the assailants specifically targeted non-Muslim students.

In 2019, the Dusit D2 Hotel and office complex in Nairobi fell victim to another orchestrated assault by Al-Shabaab. The attack, which involved a suicide bombing and a prolonged gun battle, resulted in 21 fatalities and more than 28 people were injured.

The joint US-Kenyan Camp Simba military base was targeted in 2020, further emphasizing Al-Shabaab's relentless focus on Kenya. While the attack was repelled, US and Kenyan personnel were injured and military aircraft damaged.

These incidents illustrate Al-Shabaab's sustained and alarming campaign of terror against Kenya, which creates significant challenges for the nation's security and counterterrorism efforts.

In addition to direct attacks, the group actively targets Kenya for recruitment, viewing it as fertile ground for radicalization. Al-Shabaab's recruitment strategy focuses on exploiting local grievances, particularly issues related to Kenyan government crackdowns on Somalis within the country and the challenges faced by Kenyan Muslims, primarily in the northeastern and coastal regions.

Consequently, Kenyans constitute the largest and most organized group of foreign fighters within the organization, and this has been the case for at least a decade. Local recruits from the coastal counties of Mombasa, Lamu, Kilifi and Kwale bring with them intimate knowledge of the region.

This dual dynamic — as both a target for attacks and a source of recruits — underscores the multifaceted nature of Al-Shabaab's effects on Kenya's security landscape.

As a result, the plight of communities in Boni's forest serves as a stark reminder of the challenges authorities face in dealing with the multidimensional issue of terrorism. It highlights the need for comprehensive approaches that incorporate security measures, intelligence sharing, community engagement, and regional cooperation to effectively combat extremism in this challenging terrain.

Around mid-2012, Al-Shabaab infiltrated the region and established permanent training bases in the forest, undetected by security forces. The area provides the perfect cover

for the militants, as its dense vegetation and lack of roads make it difficult to provide armored support and carry out surveillance from the air.

This situation underscores the intricate nature of the efforts to combat terrorism, and the importance of addressing not only immediate security threats but also the underlying factors that contribute to the persistent threat of extremist activities in such environments.

BETWEEN FEAR AND HOPE

The accounts of survivors paint a vivid picture of resilience and hope in the face of relentless Al-Shabaab assaults.

Anne Wanjiru Mungai survived two harrowing attacks by members of the group on the village of Juhudi. The first was an attempt to burn alive refugees in a camp for internally displaced people. In the second, a church and homes were set on fire. These experiences left the mother of five scarred, physically and emotionally.

Following official advice, she and her children sheltered indoors while security forces battled the militants in July and August 2023.

"My children were so frightened that we had to convince them to be silent and endure as the fight was raging on," Mungai said. "It's hard when you have children and an attack is conducted. We lay on the mat until morning when the gunshots stopped and calm resumed."

Months later, she remains concerned for the safety of her children. Schools that closed during the fighting have reopened but the threat of attacks continues to hang over the region. Mungai said she feels exposed in farm fields where families toil to make a living, and some nights she and her children sleep in the open air, seeking the safety of cover in dense bushes.

She believes the root cause of the violence lies in land disputes caused by a lack of proper title deeds, and appealed to the government to address an issue afflicting a community that has always considered itself "a community of close-knit friends."

Against this backdrop, the heartbreaking account of Pamela Akoth Ogutu, a 53-year-old resident of Salama village in Mpeketoni, reveals the stark reality of the situation residents face. She witnessed horrific abuse

her 19-year-old grandson, Barack Hussein, suffered at the hands of militants before they cut his throat with a sword.

The attackers then plundered Ogutu's house and set it on fire. She said she was spared only so that she could convey a warning to Kenya's President William Ruto "that he must close the Kenya-Somalia border that has been opened, with his people killing their people like chickens."

She said the attackers told her the land did not rightfully belong to Christians but to the Swahili people, and that a dire fate awaits those who dared to remain.

David Goldman, a director with Strategic Intelligence, a risk-analysis firm based in Nairobi, said that the individuals responsible for such acts are typically members of small, localized cells. He questioned whether the leadership of Al-Shabaab was responsible for incidents of beheadings and throat-cutting, because "the group has specific rules on who should be punished this way and in what circumstances."

Some people within communities in the region have become clandestine supporters of Al-Shabaab, Goldman said. Currently, "Al-Shabaab's focus is on targeting funding sources, villages, critical infrastructure, and security agencies," he added.

As a result, he said that amid the multifaceted challenges communities in Lamu are faced with, a significant point of contention revolves around the farmlands. Assigned in the late 1960s to members of Kenya's influential Kikuyu ethnic group from the central region, these lands came with one crucial privilege — title deeds that provided legal tenure to those settlers[5].

At the heart of the issue is a history of marginalization of coastal peoples, in particular the mixed-heritage Swahili, after Kenya won its independence from Britain in 1963. Mainland Lamu and Tana counties, traditionally the homelands of the Swahili, Bajuni and other smaller, neighboring communities, took a different path at independence. Instead of being administered as trust land, their communal lands remained under the authority of the state, leaving local people insecure and considered squatters on land they had inhabited for generations.

Independence was followed by the 1963-1967 Shifta (or "Bandit") War, during which ethnic Somalis in northern Kenya attempted

to break away and join Somalia. Cross-border conflict and raids, together with the activities of the Kenyan security forces, displaced the Bajuni community, disrupted economic activity and pushed the local population into poverty. Insecurity continued into the 1990s with the collapse of the Somali state.

The coastal town of Mpeketoni, which is currently experiencing attacks, serves as an example of what researchers describe as "rigged development" in Kenya, a process of government-supported land grabbing and the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities[6].

Established as a settlement scheme for landless Kikuyu in 1968, Mpeketoni has evolved into a thriving town of 50,000 people, with banks, agricultural schemes, churches and even a planned university campus.

However, amid the complex dynamics, the town has been repeatedly hit by raids. One of the most brutal took place in 2014, when Al-Shabaab militants killed 48 people.

CLANDESTINE ALLIANCE
A clandestine alliance between Al-Shabaab

and some local people has not gone unnoticed. Aden Duale, Kenya's minister of defense, who is responsible for overseeing collaboration between local leaders and security agencies, views it as a matter of grave concern. He noted Al-Shabaab and its collaborators have organized themselves across Lamu, transcending tribal and religious differences.

"These local elements have a pivotal role in the ongoing struggle for security," he said, adding that ensuring the safety of the community has become a top priority, resulting in the implementation of rigorous security protocols.

Gabriel Kioni, the deputy county commissioner of Lamu West, said: "Daily, intensive patrols have become the norm, both on land and over the waters."

These patrols involve collaborations between various security organizations, including the Kenya Defense Forces, regular police, the Rapid Deployment Unit, and the General Service Unit, with the aim of preventing Lamu being infiltrated by terrorists and other criminal elements.

"We collaborate with NGOs

(nongovernmental organizations), youth and community-based organizations to share vital information in our fight against Al-Shabaab," said Kioni.

"Our strong partnership with security agencies and the public enhances information flow, aiding counterterrorism efforts.

"Additionally, we've improved communication networks in vulnerable areas, facilitating seamless information exchange between security agencies and the public."

Several years ago, the government introduced an amnesty program for former members of Al-Shabaab and others who had joined terrorist groups but now wished to renounce violence[7].

"We continuously urge the youth to take advantage of this amnesty and seek assistance from the state for their rehabilitation," Kioni added.

In addition, the government said it has identified several factors that drive young people to join Al-Shabaab, including high unemployment, drug use and exposure to radical teachings[8].

In an attempt to tackle unemployment, the government and NGOs have allocated funds for training, efforts to encourage the nation's youth to form groups, and to enable them to apply for loans and start their own businesses, thereby diminishing the lure of terrorist groups.

In addition, Kenya Defense Forces soldiers involved in multiagency operations in the Boni forest region organize special events and activities, including visits to villages and discussions with communities about radicalization.

In terms of international partnerships, the Kenya Navy collaborates with US Army forces at Camp Simba, within the Manda Bay naval base in Lamu. Together, they conduct security operations, including aerial surveillance, to address the regional effects of Al-Shabaab's activities.

ASSAULT ON FREEDOM

The militants have specifically targeted men during their regular attacks, which has prompted male members of families to avoid sleeping in their homes. As a result, women are left to shoulder the responsibility of looking after children during the night while the men seek refuge in the wilderness or

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towns far from their remote villages. This situation reflects the deep effects the attacks are having on gender dynamics within the community.

Millicent Nyambura, a 37-year-old resident of Salama village, recalled the events of a tragic day in August this year. The residents of her entire village had spent the night away from their homes, she said, and "we returned in the morning only to discover a scene of devastation. Our homes had been set on fire and goats stolen."

She added: "In response to this growing threat, the government's advice altered the way we live our lives. People now toil in their fields and tend to their homes during daylight hours, while in the evenings they seek refuge in safer locations, locking their livestock inside their homes."

Residents live under the constant threat of terrorist attacks.

"Our daily life in the region is marked by a sense of unease, as people grapple with the uncertainty of their surroundings," said Nyambura.

Nancy Wangoi, another resident of Salama, said she sought sanctuary in the bush when her daughter heard unfamiliar voices outside their house. Wangoi saw a group of strangers approaching their homestead in the moonlight and fled with her three children through the back of their property.

While in hiding, she contacted her husband, who was not at the house at the time, to inform him of the situation. He quickly notified National Police Reserve officers, who responded swiftly and fired shots into the air. The attackers at Wangoi's homestead also discharged rounds into the air.

Wangoi and her children remained concealed and silent in the bushes until 5 a.m. the following morning. As the sun rose they cautiously made their way to the house of Mama Pamela, a neighbor, where they discovered one of the woman's sons had been murdered by the terrorists. Goats and chickens had also been stolen.

TOTALLY UNPREDICTABLE

National Police Reserve officers[9], often working in the shadows, play a vital role in protecting their communities from the ever-present threat of Al-Shabaab.

"The terrorists come in huge groups, so we always coordinate by dividing ourselves into smaller groups," said a reservist from Widho, one of the affected villages, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

"The enemy can attack Juhudi one day, then the next day Marafa, Mikinduni and Widho. They are totally unpredictable. Even we, as the NPR guarding the villages here, are worried."

He agreed with the assessment that the terrorists seem to have the support of some locals.

"Their tactics prove that they are working with the help of a local network, as they do not behave like they are new to this place," he said. "They are very conversant with the villages and that's why it has been difficult for us to trace and finish them."

There continues to be an urgent need for the government to recruit more police reservists in villages targeted by Al-Shabaab, he said, as they are always the first to respond to terrorist attacks "whenever they are orchestrated in our villages."

NPR officers work closely with the Kenya Defense Forces, the Rapid Deployment Unit, and the regular police to carry out security patrols and operations in the forest. This coordination has played a crucial part in thwarting Al-Shabaab raids, including incidents at the Juhudi Primary School camp for internally displaced people on July 12 and Aug. 24, when the attackers were met "with a swift and resolute response," the reservist officer said.

"They attacked at dawn and we responded immediately," he added, telling how one of his fellow officers was shot in the shoulder while confronting terrorists attempting to launch grenades into the camp.

COUNTERING RADICALIZATION

As a result of the attacks there has been a palpable shift in community dynamics and public attitudes[10]. Suspicion has become prevalent, eroding the trust that once existed between residents[11].

The fear of overnight attacks has forced many to avoid sleeping in their homes, with the alternative being to take refuge in the wilderness or at the Juhudi Primary School camp each evening.

"We have learned to live with the fact that at any time the terrorists might show up and finish us," said Shadrack Njuguna, a 75-year-

old retired teacher from Juhudi village.

"The way people are slaughtered like chickens here during Al-Shabaab attacks is something that is disturbing our minds. Many here are mentally unstable simply because of the scenes we have witnessed when Al-Shabaab attacks and kills innocent people."

Wangoi said that establishing security facilities in remote villages, manned by members of the Kenya Defense Forces and police officers, is of paramount importance. Additionally, she said, "increasing the numbers of the NPR in rural areas would significantly bolster security in our homes and villages, providing a sense of safety and protection."

In the face of adversity, she added, it is "essential to acknowledge that we are coping with the situation but it remains a source of ongoing worry."

Wangoi said that one of the results of the attacks is stronger bonds between civilians and the security forces.

"There's now a free flow of information between the security agencies and the local community, all geared toward ensuring the success of the fight against Al-Shabaab," she said.

Others, however, say that the efforts to enhance security remain insufficient. Ruth Njeri Muhia, for example, criticized the response of the security services to an attack on her village, Salama Block 17, on July 12, 2023.

"At around 3 a.m. I heard gunshots, so I went into hiding," she said. "The security agencies and local administrators came late in the morning only to collect the body of my slaughtered co-worker. Since then they have never come back, even to check any progress here."

She stressed the need for increased security measures and 24-hour patrols, and the role of interfaith organizations in promoting a spirit of unity in the face of division.

Acknowledging the divisive effects attacks have on communities, Judy Kimamo, of Search for Common Ground, an NGO that organizes programs across Africa in an attempt to end conflicts and build safer societies, said "efforts to counter radicalization need to be intensified."

She added: "There have been instances where farmers and herders have clashed,

with farmers perceiving herders as the financiers of the recurring attacks. This has led to unrest and animosity between these two groups."

In the face of such challenges, community-driven initiatives and support networks have emerged as beacons of hope, extending a helping hand to those affected by the relentless attacks. Interfaith organizations in particular have played a pivotal role in arranging meetings and fostering unity among local populations, helping to mitigate the divisions caused by Al-Shabaab's actions[12].

Their message is clear: Harmony and unity must prevail over the discord sown by the attacks, which have primarily targeted the members of one religious group — Christians. These assaults have, at times, fueled suspicion within communities, including doubts about whether or not Muslim neighbors have been involved in the acts of terror.

Peter Muthengi Kavura, a 45-year-old pastor at the Redeemed Gospel Church in Salama, witnessed the horrors of an Al-Shabaab attack on Aug. 21, 2023. He described the harrowing experience of seeing his church burned down, accompanied by repeated loud bangs. The distressing scene persisted until security officers arrived. Hiding until dawn, they observed security operations and patrols.

As daylight came, they saw neighboring homesteads had all been razed to the ground. The extent of the destruction became evident when Kavura returned his church and found it had been burned from its roof to the foundations. He said the profound pain he felt was intensified by the realization that the attackers had targeted a place of deep spiritual significance.

He commended the bonds between civilians and the security forces which he said have been strengthened since the attacks began, but acknowledged that tensions and conflicts remain in certain communities in the region, and highlighted the need for enhanced security patrols in all villages and along rural routes.

Kavura continues to lead his congregation in worship. It now gathers under the shelter of a tree outside the church compound, and he makes a collective call for resilience and vigilance in the face of adversity.

FOOTNOTES

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