



U.S. military convoy rolls through Rift Valley, taking part in exercise that consists of military-to-military training, as well as medical, veterinary, and engineering civic affairs programs

# Civil-Military Operations in Kenya's Rift Valley

## Sociocultural Impacts at the Local Level

BY JESSICA LEE AND MAUREEN FARRELL

In the aftermath of Kenya's December 2007 to January 2008 postelection violence, U.S. Army Reserve Civil Affairs (CA) teams began a series of school rehabilitation projects in the Rift Valley. This area was still reeling from a period of significant trauma and instability. Life in the Rift Valley had been completely disrupted. Most of the residents were displaced, markets and public places were destroyed, and schools were burned to the ground. Families' lives were turned upside down. Based on tensions over land tenure, the violence was generally described as focused on particular ethnic groups, including the Kikuyu and Kalenjin.

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The U.S. and Kenyan governments recognized that getting children back into school, particularly where multiple ethnic communities attended the same schools, would provide an important step for community healing. The CA teams' school rehabilitation projects from 2008 to 2010 in Kenya's Rift Valley Province represent an interesting case study of the application of civil-military operations (CMO) in a tense environment where people had concerns for their personal security and a lack of confidence in their government to adequately respond to the crisis.

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To investigate the sociocultural impact of this series of projects, Rear Admiral Brian Losey, commander of Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa (CJTF–HOA), requested a qualitative study of how host communities received the CA team in their villages and what it meant to the recipients to have U.S. military-supported construction projects in the period following such instability. In late August 2010, we conducted a sociocultural impact evaluation of the schools in the Rift Valley.

Based on 71 interviews with 135 participants, this article is intended to inform those who plan, train, evaluate, design messages for, and conduct CMO. Our goal is to provide such individuals with improved sociocultural information and guidance to more effectively tailor their activities and engagements in the local context, as well as support the development of CMO policy and strategic planning.

## Background

Kenya has a history of election-related violence beginning with the advent of multiparty elections in 1992. Following the contentious December 27, 2007, national elections, ethnic clashes broke out across the country. More than 1,000 people died and approximately 300,000 were displaced.<sup>1</sup> Rift Valley Province was the location of the majority of the deaths and displacements, though the capital of Nairobi and parts of Coast Province were also significantly affected. Kenyans and the international community watched in horror as neighboring ethnic groups fought each other with brutal tactics after the announcement of a thin margin of victory for President Mwai Kibaki over Raila Odinga.<sup>2</sup> While these clashes have been widely reported as ethnically based and catalyzed by a close election, at their core, these tensions are based on issues of land tenure dating back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup>

The international community, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and the government of Kenya provided humanitarian assistance for internally displaced persons (IDPs), organized peace-building efforts, and began the slow work of rebuilding infrastructure. In the spring of 2008, upon the request of U.S. Ambassador to Kenya Michael Rannenberger, CJTF–HOA deployed a CA team to Eldoret town to assist in the reconstruction of destroyed schools. Rehabilitating these schools represented the synergistic efforts of multiple players—those within the U.S. Government, as well as those between the United States and its other partners, including the Kenyan government, community-based organizations, and international aid agencies. Additionally, getting children back into school helped to restore a certain modicum of normalcy to the lives of these traumatized communities. Over the

course of approximately 2 years (April 2008–July 2010), four different CA teams supported the rehabilitation or reconstruction of facilities at 14 schools, mostly in and around Burnt Forest.<sup>4</sup> Particularly when these efforts were just beginning in mid-2008, the Rift Valley was still highly insecure and relations among the different communities were still tense.

Today, the communities surrounding these schools are still recovering. Estimates from community leadership interviewed for this article indicate that approximately 20 to 35 percent of the families who send their children to these schools still live in IDP camps, and on average 70 percent of the student body has returned to class. Interestingly, the student body increased at some schools, a change that locals attribute to the improvement of these facilities. Participants expect these numbers to rise since the August 4, 2010, referendum passed without additional violence, though some community members are thought to be waiting until after the 2012 elections to rebuild permanent structures for their homes.

## Methods

Though land tenure issues were and are the root of tensions in Kenya's Rift Valley, on the surface, much of the focus during the post-election violence was on ethnicity. With the intention to focus interview discussions on the schools and the work of the U.S. military in the area, we deliberately did not ask about or seek information that may have been considered ethnically sensitive.

We used anthropological field research methods for data collection, including semi-structured interviews and chain referral sampling. The interview population was majority Christian, and most livelihoods revolved around farming. To balance the research

sample, the researchers selected participants from a range of geographic distances from school projects funded by CJTF–HOA; with varying relationships to the school projects; from both genders; and among a diversity of representatives of local community members, NGOs, and leadership positions.

We first notified and obtained the permission of the Provincial Administration and community leadership to carry out field interviews before engaging with local community members. We walked into villages instead of driving to provide people greater latitude in deciding whether to participate in the study. That is, because we were on foot, community members had more time to decide if they wanted to interact with us. Thus, villagers could make themselves available by sitting outside their homes, or move away into their gardens or homes to passively show their disinterest in talking. Conversely, arriving by car does not allow enough time for word to spread within the village and can catch some community members off guard. Interviews were conducted in Kiswahili or English, depending on participants' preferences, with the majority of conversations in Kiswahili. Men and women were interviewed separately to ensure maximum participation.

There were several limitations to this research plan, including seasonal rains and working in agriculture-based villages where people spend most of the daylight hours on their farms tending to crops. However, given the time and seasonal constraints, this research project resulted in a comprehensive data set of 71 interviews with 135 participants at 10 locations.

## Coordination

According to U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) implementing partners, church leadership, and NGO

personnel working near and with the U.S. military, Civil Affairs efforts were well coordinated with the Provincial Administration and other local key personnel. Groups such as the Kenya Red Cross and the International Organization on Migration provided basic humanitarian assistance, including temporary housing and food. The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) additionally provided education in the camps and smaller NGOs engaged in peace-building activities among communities. The first CA team to arrive in Eldoret in spring 2008 was instrumental in repairing schools in the most devastated areas of the Rift Valley, since no other group or organization had committed to support this work.

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It was widely agreed that the Kenyan government would be unable to provide in a timely manner all the support necessary for reconstruction of the numerous schools that were damaged in the postelection violence. Several participants reiterated two reasons for the prioritization of schools in the rebuilding process: there is a clear intrinsic value in education, and schools can bring multiple communities together. With large numbers of families living in IDP camps, returning children to school took precedence even over the reconstruction of new homes.

This was the situation in which the U.S. military began CMO support to school rehabilitation and reconstruction in spring 2008. Civil Affairs teams facilitated the provision of resources to build new classrooms, teachers’ quarters, administration buildings, and

secure storage for 11 school compounds.<sup>5</sup> These efforts were an important step in preparing local schools—shared public institutions—to reopen. By extension, the CA teamwork also encouraged displaced persons to return to their home communities and farms and get their children back into school.

### **A Warm Reception**

Almost unanimously, local community members, NGO personnel, and the Provincial Administration leadership welcomed the U.S. military in the Rift Valley. Our fieldwork revealed that this welcome can be attributed to several dynamics. First, the community was still recovering from trauma and had acute needs related to certain events; the military brought tangible projects in response to these issues. Second, on the whole, Americans have an existing strong, positive relationship with these communities and this region of Kenya. Third, the military represented a trusted presence in an insecure situation.

Generally, community members and NGO personnel believed that anyone is welcome if they have something to give, and this attitude was reinforced by local religious leadership. One participant mentioned that the needs were so great in their village that they did not have the luxury of turning anyone away. “We don’t care who’s helping—just need help,” a local leader stated. When asked for an example of the most positive contribution of the CA team, one NGO worker stated, “They delivered visible structures.” A community member similarly remarked that the Soldiers made things, so we (in the community) were happy. These tangible contributions from the military filled a specific gap in the support to the local community, otherwise unmet at that time by any other groups. The highly visible structures and obvious utility

Kenya Red Cross members triage children during humanitarian aid mission by U.S. military personnel, deployed with Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa.

U.S. Air Force (Carolyn Erfle)



of the schools were much appreciated. Schools were commonly described as a public good, a way to affect change in the future of Kenya, opportunities for peace-building between communities, and important steps toward stability.

In addition, due to the previous work of U.S. agencies, U.S.-funded NGOs, and other Americans working in the area, locals assumed that Americans maintain a certain level of competency; the CA teams were thus welcomed into these communities.<sup>6</sup> “People just knew they were safe because they [the CA team members] were *wazungu* [Westerners or foreigners],” a woman in Ng’arua stated. The community welcomed the work of the Americans because they knew that “it would stand,” a community member explained. Not only do the Americans generally do good work, but locals additionally reasoned that because the Americans built these schools (as opposed to their own government), people would not try to destroy them.

Finally, several participants highlighted the appropriate application of U.S. military assets because some people feared for their safety. They recounted that having the military there made it safe. Additionally, in a few villages, participants said that the military was either the first or among the first to arrive. Being the first to arrive to help in an unstable situation gained credibility and trust among community members.

The U.S. military was described overwhelmingly as friendly to locals. Their interpersonal interactions with stakeholders bolstered local receptivity. Instability in the area, U.S. resources to rehabilitate damaged common property, and the existing positive relationship with America all contributed in part to the welcome of U.S. military personnel in the Rift Valley.



## Communications: Verbal And Nonverbal

Through effective communication, U.S. military personnel can maintain strong relationships with stakeholders, manage expectations, and reduce friction in communities. Several participants interviewed for this study highlighted a lack of clear communication with military personnel on matters such as the status of certain projects. Given the high visibility of military personnel and community expectations, maintaining clear lines of communication with key stakeholders is crucial.

School staff and NGO personnel in particular have longstanding relationships and reputations in the villages where CA teams were operating. As it was explained to us, the person who introduces the CA team to the community becomes responsible for their subsequent work. Therefore, if a CA team leaves without concluding a discussion about a project or with a project unfinished, the community then holds that

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individual who introduced them accountable for the CA team's work. For example, a headmaster of a school is responsible for updating the community on the status of school building projects. In the absence of information, such persons must make their own conclusions about why the U.S. military is behind schedule, has dropped a project, or is out of communication.

The responsibility of representing the U.S. military and its projects in an area can become

quite taxing if local individuals are without the necessary information. Two interview participants cited this issue with respect to Boror Primary School specifically. As leaders in the community, they have had to explain to locals why construction on the administration block was delayed and why no construction had begun on the bridge project that some people thought the U.S. military would support. Thus, CA teams and other CMO professionals must ensure that key stakeholders on the ground are fully informed about the status of projects and when and why there are delays.

These communities are quite accustomed to working with development organizations that provide similar project assistance. They are also accustomed to the ebb and flow of donor monies and resources. Accordingly, explanations about project funds being diverted elsewhere or a lack of funding will be understood and accepted if clearly communicated to relevant stakeholders. As a U.S.-funded NGO staff member made clear, "If a project is not viable you must communicate that to the community." Inevitably, CMO projects may occasionally fail or funding may be cut for a specific initiative. If such incidents are effectively communicated, while they may be disappointing, the community will acknowledge and seek other avenues to support those particular priorities.

**Assessments.** Equally as important as communications about projects, CA teams must communicate clearly with community members about assessments. CA teams and others in the U.S. military use the language of "assessments" when talking about visiting communities and project sites. When visiting project sites or areas for potential future engagement, CA teams, engineers, Navy SeaBees, and other military elements have been trained to be clear in their remarks to

local stakeholders about the intentions of the military to contribute resources. However, the mere presence of anyone affiliated with the U.S. military communicates a continued interest in that particular place, which may be misinterpreted by the host population as a commitment of sorts to continue dedicating resources to the area. In this regard, one NGO staffer outlined, “It is not enough to do ten assessments. The fourth time you visit you have to be doing something. . . . Successful projects had a few weeks of visitation and then the work started. . . . too much visiting with too little action leads to fatigue.”

Particularly in the aftermath of the post-election violence in this region of Kenya—where there were so many needs, and NGOs and aid organizations had such a visible presence—simply arriving at a location set a certain level of expectation on behalf of the community for assistance.

**Uniforms.** Clear verbal communications are not the only means of making a statement. Nonverbal cues can be just as effective, and the clothing U.S. military personnel don in the field is an extremely important means of communication. As an illustration, participants in this study were asked if they knew who built the schools. Nearly everyone confirmed that they knew it was Americans. However, when asked from which part of the U.S. Government or organization these came, participants had far less clarity on who these Americans really were. In communities where the CA teams were seen wearing uniforms, unsurprisingly, most participants understood they were military. In communities where the CA teams were seen in civilian clothes, their identities were more ambiguous, particularly to the average community member. Only those who worked personally with the military as construction workers or school

staff and parents knew with certainty that the “American Army” was providing this support to their schools.

Seeing Americans in uniform was not a point of concern for community members. Conversely, to a degree, the uniforms allowed a wider range of local people to know who was providing assistance.<sup>7</sup> Identification of CA team members and other CMO professionals as representatives of the U.S. military may or may not be a goal of the United States in East Africa. Nonetheless, it should be understood that without better branding of U.S. military personnel, community members will continue to view them as civilians.

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### Role of the Kenyan Military

The Kenyan military was active in the Rift Valley during the postelection violence, most prominently by securing major roadways and supporting the local efforts of the Kenyan police.<sup>8</sup> In fact, the Kenyan military was praised in the aftermath of the clashes for not becoming involved in the propagation of violence and for its professionalism in adhering to its designated roles under civilian control.<sup>9</sup> Interviews revealed that there was some early collaboration between Kenyan forces and the CA team, but it seems that their partnership existed only during the initial phases of the projects and faded soon after.

Interview respondents drew clear lines between the role of the Kenyan military and what the CA teams did in terms of infrastructure rehabilitation. However, participants

were open to the idea of having Kenyan forces engage in infrastructural support projects such as the schools that were rehabilitated by the U.S. military, stating that if the Kenyan military brought needed assistance, they would be welcome. “People saw the U.S. doing these things and would like to see their military doing similar things,” a community leader stated. An NGO leader stated, “We wish that our [Kenyan] army would do these types of things.” It was a common theme in interviews that, particularly during times of such great desperation, people would accept help from anywhere.

Although no one stated that the Kenyan military would be unwelcome in their community if they were providing assistance, several participants articulated some level of discomfort about their military in general. A community member stated that the Kenyan military is “arrogant” and that people are comfortable with the U.S. but not the Kenyan military. NGO staff members and school officials talked about how the Kenyan military is feared by the general

In spite of some of these reservations, others expressed more optimism about Kenyan military work in the community, including one school teacher who stated that people generally understand that their military is not there to cause harm. Teachers and NGO staff members explained that U.S. military presence through the CA teams broadened people’s understandings about the Kenyan military, demystifying the roles of the military. One teacher explained that working with the CA team showed the community that military members are “human beings with feelings.” Based on these and the above comments, the researchers concluded that the Kenyan military would be welcomed by people in the Rift Valley to conduct CMO if they provided tangible assistance and their objectives and motives were easily understood by the local population.

### Exiting

How a CA team leaves a community may be just as important as how it enters. Fieldwork for this article was completed just 1 month following the departure of the last CA team in Eldoret, so it seemed an ideal time to investigate how CA teams say good-bye to a community. In the minds of the local populace, though, the U.S. military has not left the Rift Valley because locals do not differentiate between groups inside the organization. The CA team departed the area and said good-bye to key partners at the end of July 2010. However, in late August, a Navy SeaBee detachment was working on one of the schools, engineers came to assess some of the buildings, construction had yet to begin on two of the schools, and other U.S. military personnel were in the area. To people in the Rift Valley, these groups are one and the same. Therefore, the message was conveyed that the U.S. military was still in the area.

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population, while other community members expressed reservations about what the military might be bringing to their community and why. Aside from distrust or feelings of apprehension, many participants explained that their military does not do community engagements. Thus, there would have to be a significant shift in how stakeholders understood the role(s) of the Kenyan military to effectively integrate their work into local communities.



When we queried people to learn about how the CA team members communicated their good-bye, it was clear that the host community did not consider them actually gone. For example, when asked if she was aware that the CA team had left, the chairperson of an NGO responded, “No, they are there even now, rebuilding the school” (referring to the Navy SeaBees). Comments such as this are indicative of a larger trend that host communities do not distinguish between various U.S. military groups. In this case, having a CA team say farewell to communities that are still hosting military personnel is a confusing and somewhat contradictory message. It should thus be understood that it is unrealistic to expect host nation populations to distinguish among the various groups within the U.S. military, and one group leaving means little if other Servicemembers are still in a given area.

Despite efforts of the U.S. military to clearly communicate messages—articulated with the best of intentions—local expectations are developed based on visits to and engagements in a given area. Thus, saying good-bye is much less of a clean break when one factors in the constant influx of various military players in a single area. Hypothetically, if a project goes poorly or a Navy SeaBee mistakenly offends a local leader, this impacts what a CA team does and local understandings about the collective U.S. military presence. The uniformity with which host communities view all parts of the American military has implications for the design of strategic communications: When crafting messages for local communities, military parties must consider the total presence of Department of Defense personnel.

## Conclusion

Eldoret, an area with recent trauma that is undergoing a slow healing process, seems to have been a constructive application of civil-military operations. The communities and other stakeholders involved welcomed and cooperated with the Civil Affairs team and, given the provision of tangible support, were left with an overwhelmingly positive impression. The team generally maintained close relationships with provincial and village leadership, as well as U.S. Government and nongovernmental organization personnel. Through these close relationships, the team had the opportunity to receive and follow the advice of those who have expertise in working in the area. **PRISM**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> International Crisis Group, “Kenya in Crisis,” Africa Report No. 137, February 21, 2008, available at <[www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/africa/horn-of-africa/kenya/137-kenya-in-crisis.aspx](http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/africa/horn-of-africa/kenya/137-kenya-in-crisis.aspx)>.

<sup>2</sup> The Electoral Commission of Kenya reported that incumbent Mwai Kibaki (Party of National Unity) won 46.4 percent of the vote versus 44.1 percent for Raila Odinga (Orange Democratic Movement).

<sup>3</sup> See Peter Hertz and Gregory Myers, remarks from “Land Tenure and Property Policies in East Africa” seminar held at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, DC, April 23, 2008, available at <[www.wilsoncenter.org/ondemand/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.play&mediaid=C178B8B7-B92F-CDF7-36D29545F8A4F1AB](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/ondemand/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.play&mediaid=C178B8B7-B92F-CDF7-36D29545F8A4F1AB)>.

<sup>4</sup> Henceforth in this article, *the schools* refer to these 14 schools supported by CJTF-HOA. Construction is still ongoing at Boror Primary School, and contract labor commenced in the fall of 2010 at Chwele Girls and Teremi Boys Secondary Schools.

<sup>5</sup> This work continues at Boror, Chwele, and Teremi.

<sup>6</sup> Additionally, given current geopolitics and the overwhelming majority of Christians living in the area, the sensitivities of Kenyans living in the Rift Valley to U.S. military vary from their coastal neighbors.

<sup>7</sup> According to recent CA team members in Eldoret, the first of the four teams in the Rift Valley wore uniforms during their deployment. Beginning with the second team, members wore civilian clothes.

<sup>8</sup> Justice Philip Waki, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Post Election Violence*, October 15, 2008, 53, 378–379, available at <[www.standardmedia.co.ke/downloads/Waki\\_Report.pdf](http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/downloads/Waki_Report.pdf)>.

<sup>9</sup> Praise was bestowed on the Kenyan military by former Secretary-General of the United Nations Kofi Annan, the U.S. Embassy in Kenya, the European Union, the African Union, and the East African Community.