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THE WORLD

Forced circumcision reported in Kenya

Terror takes a new form as roaming gangs from one tribe threaten to 'chop them all' amid the postelection violence.

January 09, 2008 | [Robyn Dixon](#) | Times Staff Writer

LIMURU, KENYA — When men with machetes and axes chased Paul Otieno from his home here, they wanted more than his belongings. They wanted to cut off his foreskin.

"They were shouting, 'If we don't kill you, we'll cut your private parts,' " Otieno, a 25-year-old mechanic, said of the attack Sunday. "They were just shouting, 'Kill! Chop them all!'"

In Kenya, circumcision is a rite of passage for male members of most tribes. The Luos, however, do not practice it. In the recent tribal violence triggered by a disputed Dec. 27 election, circumcision checks have been conducted by roaming gangs of killers hunting for Luos. And the threat of forced circumcision has been used to terrify Luo men.

The number of such assaults so far appears small. The hospital here in Limuru, 30 miles northwest of Nairobi, confirmed that two cases of forced circumcision were treated after Sunday's violence, which saw members of the larger Kikuyu tribe evict hundreds of Luos from their homes. One case involved an adult, the other a 4-month-old.

But rumors of men being circumcised by gangs from rival tribes have cast a shadow of fear over Luos, who feel their manhood and cultural practices are under threat.

Kenya's violence is on one level political, reflecting the rivalry for control between President Mwai Kibaki, a Kikuyu, and opposition candidate Raila Odinga, a Luo. In the election campaign, the fact that Odinga was uncircumcised became an issue: He was seen by some Kikuyus as a "child" unfit to rule because he had not passed through circumcision and initiation.

As the postelection violence quickly focused on tribal animosities, there were sinister echoes of that debate. Witnesses have reported cases in which Kikuyus cut off the genitals of Luo men they had killed and paraded them as trophies.

On Tuesday, there was little sign of a political breakthrough that could alleviate tribal tensions. Kibaki, whose claim of electoral victory has been rejected by the opposition, announced the appointment of some Cabinet members, a move bound to further rile his opponents. Meanwhile, Odinga rejected an offer from the president to meet face to face Friday.

African Union Chairman John Kufuor, the president of Ghana, flew in Tuesday to try to get the parties talking and to end the violence.

The attack on the 4-month-old in Limuru occurred as his 14-year-old cousin was carrying him on her back through the forest, a hospital spokeswoman said. The teen was raped and the child circumcised. His wound later became infected.

Roy Ochiengwa, 17, was walking home Sunday from the grinding mill in Limuru with his 6-year-old brother, Alex, when they were stopped by about 20 Kikuyus armed with machetes, axes and stones. The

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assailants were looking for Luos to attack, but Ochiengwa is of the Luhya tribe and is therefore circumcised.

"They forced me to sit down," Ochiengwa said. "They were asking me if I had been circumcised. They said, 'What tribe are you?' I was with my young brother. They asked, 'What about him? What's his tribe?'"

"They unzipped my trousers to see if I was circumcised. I was just shaking and fearing for my life. I almost fainted. I just felt helpless," he said. "When they found I was circumcised they let me go. They said, 'Just go and don't look back.'"

Although he escaped, the encounter haunts him. He and other Luhyas have been evicted from their houses, along with the Luos; they were waiting for buses Tuesday to take them out of predominantly Kikuyu territory around Limuru to western Kenya.

"When I'm sleeping, I even dream they're coming. I dream they make me sit down and they actually chop me. The dream keeps coming back," Ochiengwa said.

Charles Obonyo, 35, also Luhya, said he was stopped Sunday in Limuru by four Kikuyus with clubs. They also demanded to see whether he was circumcised before letting him go.

But being Luhya did not save a 25-year-old student named Stephen Makhoka, who was accosted Dec. 30 by a gang of Kikuyus as he was on his way to buy vegetables in Soweto, a Nairobi neighborhood.

"They demanded to see his private parts. They demanded to know, 'Are you a Luo or not?'" said his aunt, Jane Nafula, 48. "He pleaded with them to let him go because he was not involved in politics, but they refused. They started chopping his face. A piece of his face was chopped off and he had no nose left. They chopped his stomach and then they chopped off his private parts."

Nafula was interviewed at the morgue where she was collecting his body.

"People were saying an uncircumcised man cannot be our leader. So they were saying they would go to Kibera and Kawangwari and Mathare and circumcise all the Luos," Nafula said, referring to several of Nairobi's slums.

The rumors of forced circumcisions have deepened feelings of tribal hatred among many Luos, already angry because they believe Kibaki stole the election. Luos have been at the forefront of postelection protests, attacking the president's fellow Kikuyus and looting their shops.

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