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Kenya Red Cross: Clashes Signal Violent Election Year

by Gabe Joselow

NAIROBI — The head of Kenya's Red Cross says ethnic clashes across the country in recent months are an early indication that pre-election violence will be worse than in the past. The warning follows fighting in Coast Province this week that left 53 people dead and that observers have said was politically motivated.

Kenya Red Cross Secretary General Abbas Gullet told reporters in Nairobi Friday there is bound to be violence across the country ahead of next year's planned presidential election, as has been the case before every vote since 1992.

But he says the scope of clashes taking place this year outline a more disturbing trend than in other years.

"At this rate, if we continue for the next six months we will make the post-election violence of 2008 be a child's play, at this rate. And I'm not being an alarmist, and I'm not saying this for any other thing, but simply to say, we have a problem, and we, as Kenyans, have a fundamental responsibility," said Gullet.

Recent violence includes a clash in the Tana River district of Coast Province this week in which armed members of the Pokomo clan raided a village occupied by the Orma community, killing 53 people, mostly women and children.

The two communities have fought over resources for years, but officials believe there is also a political element at play. Kenya's defense minister has ordered an investigation of an assistant minister accused of involvement.

Gullet says this attack was clearly orchestrated. He has called on Kenya's "political elite" to actively promote peace and for perpetrators of violence to be prosecuted.

"If the temperature is not reduced, if we do not preach peace, if we do not preach tolerance I think we are headed in the wrong direction as a nation," he said.

Tana River is not the only part of Kenya experiencing inter-ethnic fighting this year. The Red Cross says 82 people have been killed this year in fighting in the West Pokot and Turkana area in northwestern Kenya, while 48 people have been killed and more than 50,000 displaced in Moyale near the Ethiopian border.

Gullet called the violence a "silent disaster" and said an important question being asked is if the country would respond differently if the violence were to take place in Nairobi or Rift Valley, rather than in these more remote areas.

Violence after the disputed presidential election in late 2007 killed an estimated 1,300 people and displaced more than 300,000. The dispute led to formation of Kenya's current power-sharing government.