

January 8, 2008

Kenyan Leader and Opponent to Meet

By [JEFFREY GETTLEMAN](#)

Correction Appended

ELDORET, [Kenya](#) — For the first time since Kenya exploded into election-related violence that has killed more than 400 people, the president and the top opposition leader have agreed to meet, both sides said Monday.

[Mwai Kibaki](#), the president who won re-election last week after a deeply flawed vote count, invited Raila Odinga, the top opposition leader who said he was cheated out of victory, to talks on Friday; Mr. Odinga indicated that he would go, if certain conditions were met.

Mr. Kibaki's press service issued a short statement on Monday night saying the purpose of the meeting was "to dialogue on the stoppage of violence in the country, consolidation of peace and national reconciliation" after more than a week of post-election turmoil that has dented the country's prized image of stability.

Kenya's highest-ranking religious leaders, including an Anglican archbishop and the chairman of the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims, were invited to attend, along with five members of Mr. Odinga's political party.

The much-anticipated meeting was announced as other progress seemed to be taking place on the political front, with the chairman of the [African Union](#), John A. Kufuor, expected to arrive in Kenya this week and Mr. Odinga agreeing to call off huge protest rallies scheduled for Tuesday that many Kenyans feared would degenerate into bloodshed.

Salim Lone, a spokesman for Mr. Odinga, said the rallies had been canceled because “we wanted to create a conducive environment for negotiations; we wanted to show that we are serious.”

As for the negotiations, Mr. Lone said, “We will be happy to participate if this meeting is part of the process that will be put in place by John Kufuor.” Mr. Kufuor, who is also president of Ghana, is expected to arrive in Kenya on Tuesday or Wednesday.

Though the political impasse seems to be easing somewhat, the two sides are still very far apart, with both Mr. Kibaki, 76, and Mr. Odinga, 63, claiming victory in the elections and blaming each other for the shocking level of violence that burst in Kenya last weekend after disputed election results were announced.

For the most part, Kenya has escaped the ethnic hatreds that have consumed Rwanda, Congo and Sudan. But this election, the most competitive in the country’s history, seemed to aggravate deep-seated resentments that had been festering for years.

On Monday, a Kenyan government committee raised the death toll from the recent post-election fighting to 486, though the opposition said it was closer to 1,000.

Many of Mr. Odinga’s supporters vented their outrage toward Kikuyus, Mr. Kibaki’s tribe, which has dominated business and politics in Kenya since independence in 1963. Dozens, if not hundreds, of Kikuyus across the country have been massacred in the past 10 days, and tens of thousands have been forced to flee ethnically-mixed areas. Mr. Odinga is a member of the Luo tribe, and in Luo areas, mobs have hacked Kikuyus to death with machetes and burned down Kikuyu businesses.

Maina Kiai, chairman of the Kenya National [Commission on Human Rights](#), said there is still a long way to go to negotiating an end to the crisis but the scheduled meeting “will clearly calm down the country.”

“People want to see them talking,” he said.

Jendayi E. Frazer, the American assistant secretary of state for African affairs, who has been in Kenya for the past three days trying to broker a truce between the government and opposition leaders, said that the vote count had indeed been rigged, but that both parties could have been involved. Election observers have said there was widespread evidence of irregularities during vote tabulations, which gave Mr. Kibaki, who had been trailing in the early stages of the counting process by as much as one million votes, a suspiciously thin margin of victory at the 11th hour.

“The people of Kenya were cheated,” Ms. Frazer said.

Mr. Odinga has been pushing for an outside mediator to broker negotiations because he says he does not trust the government. Government officials initially refused, saying that the crisis was a Kenyan problem and that they could handle it themselves.

But government officials seemed to relent over the weekend when they announced that an African Union delegation that the government originally rebuffed was on its way. However, on Monday, Alfred Mutua, a government spokesman, argued at a news conference that Mr. Kufuor was not coming as a mediator.

“This is a fact-finding tour,” he said.

Here in Eldoret, in the epicenter of Kenya’s post-election violence, the facts are rather disturbing.

In this ethnically-mixed area of the Rift Valley, more than 140 people have been killed, most by machete, blunt objects and fire.

There is a woman in Ward 5 of the main hospital whose body is covered with oozing burns except for one spot on her chest. That is where she was cradling her child.

She said she was inside a church last week after a mob set it on fire. As she tried to escape, she tripped on a burning mattress. She fell and her 2-year-old daughter, Joyce, burned to death in front of her. Up to 50 people who had been seeking refuge inside the church were killed, most of them women and children, all of them Kikuyus.

Witnesses said the attackers were from the Kalenjin tribe, which voted heavily for Mr. Odinga and clashed fiercely with Kikuyus over land before the elections of 1992.

The woman, 36, is now the mother of six children and wanted to be identified only as Mary. She cannot sit up without wincing.

It is hard to tell what hurts more, Mary said, the guilt or the pain.

“My daughter liked to sing,” she said, as tears streaked down her puffy face. “I tried to save her, but I couldn’t. I was on fire, too.”

Correction: January 12, 2008

Picture captions with an article on Tuesday about the aftermath of a disputed presidential election in Kenya misspelled the name of the president’s ethnic group, whose members were targets of much of the violence by opposition supporters. They are the Kikuyus, not the Kiyukus.