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Kenya Crisis Worsens as Opposition Cools to Talks

By [JEFFREY GETTLEMAN](#)

NAIROBI, [Kenya](#) — The political mood darkened again in Kenya on Tuesday, with opposition leaders cooling to the idea of negotiations with the government after the president unilaterally made major cabinet appointments, a move that set off riots across the country almost immediately.

Bonfires burned in Kisumu on Lake Victoria, ethnic clashes erupted in the slums around Nairobi, the capital, and protesters began to mass in the port city of Mombasa.

The political crisis here, which has claimed at least 486 lives and probably many more, seems to be raising wider concerns, with President Bush issuing a statement urging “both sides to engage in peaceful dialogue” and Senator [Barack Obama](#) speaking to opposition leaders by telephone.

Mr. Obama, Democrat from Illinois who is running for president, has close ties to Kenya. His father was Kenyan and a member of the same ethnic group as Kenya’s top opposition leader, Raila Odinga. Mr. Obama took a short break from campaigning on Monday and asked Mr. Odinga to meet directly with Kenya’s president without preconditions, a spokesman for Mr. Obama said.

John A. Kufuor, the president of Ghana and chairman of the [African Union](#), arrived in Nairobi on Tuesday to help facilitate a truce, but it seemed that his trip, which had been proposed as mediation between the government and the opposition, had already begun to resemble an official state visit to help the Kenyan government solve this crisis. Opposition leaders say the question should be who is the rightful leader.

Opposition leaders, with Western election observers, have said that evidence is widespread that the president's party rigged the vote tallying process to stay in power.

Those accusations ignited a burst of violence across Kenya last week, with mobs stoning supporters of the president, burning down houses and clashing with the police. A Kenyan government committee said 486 people had been killed, but it counted only bodies taken to public hospitals. The fighting has been fueled by longstanding resentment toward the president's ethnic group, the Kikuyus, whom other groups accuse of occupying their land and monopolizing power.

Unbowed, [Mwai Kibaki](#), Kenya's president, announced Tuesday, just moments before Mr. Kufuor strolled down a red carpet at Nairobi's international airport, that he had chosen half of his new cabinet.

He entrusted the most important ministries, like internal security, finance, energy and justice, to political allies. He appointed Kalonzo Musyoka, who came in a distant third in last month's election, as vice president. Not a single member of the [Orange Democratic Party](#), Mr. Odinga's opposition party, which won the most seats in Parliament, was appointed.

Opposition leaders called that "a slap in the face."

"You don't pre-empt negotiations by giving away all the important posts," said Salim Lone, a spokesman for Mr. Odinga. "This shows that the government is not seriously committed to dialogue."

Mr. Kibaki, in his brief televised address, said, "In naming the cabinet, I have considered the importance of keeping the country united, peaceful and prosperous and a strong broad-based leadership."

On Monday, things had begun to look much better, and hope was growing that the political impasse was ending. The president invited opposition leaders to talks scheduled for Friday, and the opposition leaders indicated that they were willing to go if the talks were part of a peace process brokered by the African Union. Mr. Odinga called off huge protest rallies that many Kenyans had feared would deteriorate into bloodshed.

But the tone changed Tuesday, with Mr. Odinga calling the talks “a sideshow” and saying Mr. Kibaki was not Kenya’s legitimate president.

“Let Mr. Kibaki know we don’t recognize him,” Mr. Odinga said at a news conference. “We want to meet him. But we don’t recognize him.”

Mr. Kibaki also announced that Parliament would resume operations on Tuesday. Opposition leaders say that they will occupy the seats reserved for the government because they contend they are the lawful government.

Jendayi E. Frazer, the United States assistant secretary of state for African affairs, who is here trying to help end the standoff, said Tuesday that she was increasingly concerned, especially about the ethnic fighting that had driven more than 200,000 people from their homes.

“There is a certain poison in the air,” she said, in an interview broadcast on a Kenyan television network.

If the political impasse is not resolved, Ms. Frazer said, “Kenya will have a long future of instability.”

Kenya's economy, the biggest in East Africa, is already hurting. The unrest, which has included gangs blocking roads with downed trees and mobs looting tea plantations, has impeded trade across the region.

On Tuesday, Amos Kimunya, Kenya's finance minister who was reappointed to his post, said that the election turmoil had cost the country \$1 billion.

Jeff Zeleny contributed reporting from New Hampshire.

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