

INTERNATIONAL

Kenyan women: Cheap liquor killing our men

By Philip Ngunjiri

Special to Sentinel-Voice

NAIROBI (IPS) — A group of women from one of Nairobi's largest slums have raided a number of illicit breweries in the city, accusing the brewers of ruining the health of their husbands and sons.

The women, who numbered in the hundreds, raided every suspected brewery and destroyed equipment used for making the alcohol in the sprawling slum of Kangemi, 10 kilometers west of the Kenyan capital of Nairobi.

The raiders, who began their operation late last year, have accused the police and Nairobi's city authorities of turning a blind eye to the producers of the cheap gin, commonly known as "chan'gaa."

"How long shall we watch our husbands and sons get wasted by the drink?" asked Miriam Wangeci, one of the leaders of the group.

"The situation is so bad that our children steal valuables from our homes and take them out to the brewers in exchange for drinks and drugs," she said.

Monica Njeri, a single mother with a 17-year-old son, said the women have taken the law into their hands because the authorities have failed to address the problem.

"As young as he is, I've already bailed him out of jail four times for alcohol and drug-related cases," she said.

The brewers, along with their agents, have warned of "severe retribution" if the women continue to interrupt

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their business.

One man who identified himself only as "Kim" has accused the women of starting a war which, he says, they will never win.

"If they are women enough let them touch the big chang'aa dealers. The moment they tread on our toes, Kangemi will go up in flames," he warned.

Kim says the women are lucky because they only target small dealers who have "no teeth to bite."

The chang'aa, which is made from sorghum or millet, is popular because it is affordable to the majority of Kenyans who are too poor to spend money on a bottle of legal beer.

The price of the chang'aa ranges from 10 to 20 shillings per water-size glass, while a whole 700-milliliter bottle fetches up to 70 shillings, depending on the potency. One U.S. dollar is equal to 60 Kenya shillings.

Social workers have expressed concern about the raids.

"This is the right time to defuse the time bomb," says Muiro Mohotia of the Nairobi-based Springs Counseling Service. "There is an upsurge of similar cases, where people arrest suspects, prosecute and convict them and administer 'mob justice' by lynching the victims."

Nairobi city authorities say they are doing their best to stop the manufacture of the alcohol.

"Chang'aa dealers are arrested on a daily basis and taken to court. Last week alone we arrested 10 dealers, some of whom have appeared in court," says Joseph Karanja who works in the slum.

He appealed to the women to refrain from taking the law into their hands. "The best thing the women can do is report the suspects to the police," he said.

Last year, a group of women from central Kenya fought a running battle with the police after complaining that the brewing and consumption of illicit beverages were slowing down economic activities in their region. The women were later joined by local church leaders and politicians. The move led to the banning of all forms of illicit alcohol by the Kenyan Parliament.

Yet, the illicit beer brewers continue their trade, and some even attempt to strengthen the drink by adding substances which are lethal.

According to Kenyan newspapers, last year more than 100 villagers in Mai Mahiu, 60 kilometers west of Nairobi, died as a result of consuming such alcohol. Hundreds were rendered blind by an adulterated mix

of "chan'gaa."

Sample contents of the alcohol, analyzed by a government chemist, revealed that the drink contains excessive amounts of methanol, an industrial alcohol.

Police figures show that more than 6,000 people died last year as a result of consuming the alcohol.

Economists attribute the proliferation of cheap alcoholic beverages among the poor to the bad economy.

Figures released by the Minister for Economic Planning and Development George Saitoti in the "1998 Kenya Economic Survey," show that virtually all economic indicators including growth, per capita income, sectarian performances and social indicators are at their lowest.

"Low-income Kenyans, hardest hit by high rates of inflation and the ever increasing prices of beer and other legal spirits, have been forced to turn to cheap alcohol," says Zephania Ong'ata of the Nairobi-based Kenya Institute of Policy Management.

WORLD BRIEFS

UN TO DISCUSS EFFECTS OF BURGEONING WORLD POPULATION

NEW YORK (IPS) — By October, the world's population will have reached six billion, according to U.N. Population Fund statistics. And, the numbers keep growing despite the 2.6 billion people who still lack basic sanitation, the 1.5 billion who have no access to clean water, the 1.1 billion who do not have decent housing and the some 900 million who do not benefit from modern health services. An international forum will begin Monday in The Hague to review the implementation of a 20-year program of action adopted at the U.N. International Conference on Population and Development in September 1994 in Cairo, Egypt. It will be preceded by an NGO forum, a youth forum and a parliamentarians' meeting. The Cairo + 5 process, as the activities leading up to the fifth anniversary of the ICPD are more commonly known, will continue with the 32nd session of the Commission on Population and Development. That meeting will prepare delegates for a June 30-July 2 U.N. General Assembly Special Session that will review the ICPD action program's implementation.

AFRICAN-AMERICAN DELEGATION MONITORS GABON ELECTION

A diverse group of African-Americans recently went to Gabon as the U.S. delegation to monitor the presidential election in the central African nation. Organized by Melvin Foote, executive director of the Constituency for Africa, the delegation was among more than 170 monitors from around the world on hand to observe how the election was run. Team members were impressed by the efficient manner of the vote-counting process in which El Hadj Omar Bongo was named president. Bongo, who has been president since 1967, won 67 percent of the votes. Members of the delegation included Madam Ruth Sando Perry, a former Liberian head of state who currently runs the Perry Center in Columbus, Ohio; Justice Gregory Kellam Scott of the Colorado Supreme Court; and representatives from the public and private sectors, a non-profit African development organization and the media.

This Week on Channel 10



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Literature and Life:
The Givens Collection

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The Black Press:

Soldiers Without Swords

Monday, Feb. 8 at 10 p.m.

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KLVX

Growing with you for 30 years!

Congo rebels cool to Kabila's peace bid

KIGALI, Rwanda (AP) — Congolese rebels reacted coolly Monday to Congo President Laurent Kabila's bid to restore political parties, saying he had attached too many conditions.

Kabila banned political parties after ousting longtime dictator Mobutu Sese Seko in May 1997. On Sunday, he issued a decree with a series of stringent conditions for restoring political life, including insisting on a \$10,000 bond for each party and a limit on age and regional representation.

"Like Mobutu, he remains a dictator, and only if he agrees to negotiate with us directly can this war end," said Ernest Wamba dia Wamba, leader of the main rebel Congolese Democratic Coalition. "This is to show European donors that he is doing something."

Wamba said he did not believe Kabila was sincere in his intentions to restore political freedoms that led the rebel coalition of ethnic Tutsis, disaffected Congolese soldiers and opposition politicians to take up arms in August.

So far, Kabila has refused to negotiate with the rebels, demanding instead that Rwanda and Uganda withdraw their support for the rebels.

Kabila himself is receiving military support from Angola, Zimbabwe, Namibia and Chad.

Last month, foreign powers fighting in Congo agreed to sign a cease-fire among themselves, followed by a separate cease-fire document which they hope will be signed by the government and the rebels. Rwandan officials said no date has been agreed yet for that signing.

Meanwhile, the rebels kept up military pressure on the government defending the key diamond city of Mbuji-Mayi in southwestern Congo by capturing the town of Lubao, 160 miles away. Diamonds are one of the principal sources of revenue for Kabila's government.

In northern Congo, another rebel group sponsored by Uganda said they had retaken Gemena, 600 miles northeast of Kinshasa, over the weekend.