KENYA: Bandits take advantage of porous border

The Kenya-Ethiopia border has for long been a security problem for the northern Kenya districts of Marsabit and Moyale since early 1990s. Militias and other rebels fighting the Government in Addis Ababa have found a safe haven in Kenya. Cases of attacks by Ethiopian militias at the border have been common place.

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In 2003 and 2004 for instance, several people including a senior police officer died in such incursions. Insurgence in southern Ethiopia pitting rebels from the Oromo Liberation Front against the Government security forces always spill over to Kenya.

The OLF militias cross the border at will to hide among their relatives especially in Sololo division of Moyale district. And the Ethiopian forces usually cross the border line in pursuit of the rebels.

In the cross-fire, it is innocent Kenyans who suffer. In July 2003, Sololo police boss, Inspector Arthur Imo and his driver Constable Ann Dime died after a landmine blew up their vehicle.

The incident occurred on the Sololo-Makutano Road as the police boss hurried to rescue a chief who had been attacked by armed raiders in his Makutano office. The chief was shot dead by the raiders believed to be from Ethiopia.

In the previous month, a Moyale businessman Hirbo Dime perished in similar circumstances. A landmine blew up his vehicle on the Moyale-Marsabit Road. Eight passengers who were in the vehicle sustained serious injuries.

Another victim Wario Jatani Duba was relaxing in a hotel in Moyale town when a hand grenade was thrown at the hotel. He died on the spot while two of his companions were seriously injured.

In May 2004, the assistant chief of Heliu sub-location in Moyale district, Mr Adam Mohammed, escaped death narrowly after a hand grenade attack on his house. Mr Mohammed, his wife and four children were seriously injured.

War in Ethiopia

Provincial commissioner John Nadasaba was quoted in the Daily Nation of May 6, 2004 saying: “It is actually the war in Ethiopia that spills over into our territory . . . if they were to solve their differences on their own soils, without crossing over into Kenya, we would not be experiencing the present crisis in northern Kenya.”

The heavy presence of illegal immigrants from Ethiopia has also been a thorny issue.

Generally, the Kenya-Ethiopian border is porous. During dry spells in Kenya, pastoralists in the northern part of the country usually cross over to Ethiopia in search of pasture and water for their livestock. On the other hand, during the rain seasons, Ethiopian pastoralists migrate to Kenya where hot weather is ideal for their animals.

Again both the Borana and the Gabra communities who mainly inhabit the northern Kenya region have relatives across the border.

Since these communities are principally nomads, some are not even certain of their country of origin. Some herdiers have identity cards for both countries.

With such inter-dependence, members of the OLF and bandits from Ethiopia find it easy to cross the border into Kenya.

Getting rid of these aliens has been a big challenge for the Kenyan authorities. It is not easy to tell a Kenyan Borana from his Ethiopian counterpart. It is the same with a Kenyan and Ethiopian Gabra.

They have common features and complexion, speak the same language and a big number of Ethiopians have Kenyan identity cards.

Lately, Kenyan security forces say several OLF militias have crossed the border. The militias are hired during conflicts by the rich who fuel inter-ethnic conflicts for selfish interest.

Corruption is also rife along the Kenya-Ethiopia border at the Moyale border point. A syndicate involving unscrupulous immigration officers and a group of middlemen has made it easy for aliens to enter into Kenya.

Between 20 and 50 Ethiopian nationals are believed to be crossing the border daily on their way to Nairobi under the pretext of either paying a visit to their relatives or seeking medical attention across the border.

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