

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JBG-31  
Shooting at Kirawara

Thika, Kenya  
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Dear Mr. Rogers:

For two days I have been in the Thika area, scene of the latest and worst of the Kenya disorders. By American standards Thika is a very small railroad-station town, tiny compared to Nairobi which is twenty-five miles south. The town boasts a small tannery, an African trade school and a number of good-sized Indian stores or dukas. It is on the east edge of a Kikuyu reserve or tribal area. The natives seen here appear well-fed and, although their predominantly European style clothes are ragged, they are well above the general standard of East Africa.

The town has a neat government headquarters building with a police station and prison some distance away. Blue-sweatered native police, tall, leather-belted, carrying service rifles, herd work parties of prisoners round the town. Prisoners appear docile, and when I stopped to take a photograph one group dispersed into the brush as I aimed the camera and the guard, understanding their camera shyness, did not even unsling his rifle but merely shouted to his disappearing charges to return. Sheepishly they did, and I got my photograph. At first glance the impression is one of typical African tranquillity with each native minding his own business and a lazy understanding - like that between the guard and his prisoners - prevailing between white, black and brown.

The police station and its surroundings are a little island of activity, strange to the rest of the scene. Trucks and cars move in and out glutting its small parking lot and overflowing onto the gulf-green grass of its lawn. Some of the trucks are loaded with the blue-sweatered, rifle-carrying guards, moving in and out on patrol or sentry duty, or to man the several road blocks. The cars belong largely to civilian Europeans, called in during this local emergency to supplement the three regular European police officers at Thika. The lower ranking white reservists loll outside the station door on a small verandah. All are busy cleaning Sten guns and service rifles. Nearly all carry revolvers or pistols and extra bandoliers of .303 ammunition slung on their shoulders. One has a .303 sniper's pattern rifle, obviously for the purpose of picking off mob leaders at a distance.

Inside the office a police officer, wearing the silver crown equivalent emblem to a major's in the British army, operates an aircraft radio set. A light plane inscribing huge circles west of the town reports in continually its observations of groups of natives on the ground and the movements of police trucks and other vehicles in the native reserves. I ask him if it would be

inconvenient to provide me with an escort into the reserve and he explains that these civilian call-ups are all he has left and they constitute his only "striking force." Most of the regulars are out searching the reserve on an alarm from the aircraft which soon turns out to be false. The European woman secretary who has been taking notes of the radio reports puts down her pencil and watches the trucks return. It is a large patrol of native police led by a 22-year-old blond Englishman, William Blackwell, and he brings in a negative report, no crowd, no disorders and no shooting. The feeling of relief which was very real was completely concealed by all who were waiting.

Yesterday there had been an alarm that was not false. At 12:30 young Blackwell had heard of a disorderly crowd at Kirawara, some 14 miles west of his station. He had loaded some 20 African police and two European inspectors into trucks and a car and had driven towards the spot. On the way he picked up a native corporal who had already gone to the disturbed market place and who told a story of finding the crowd extremely hostile, moving towards him, and of opening fire on the crowd with the two rifles and one shotgun he and his assistants had been carrying. Blackwell drove on to the market place, found the crowd still there and about 2,000 strong. He moved towards them, formed his men on the two open sides of the square which measured some 80 by 100 yards and ordered the crowd to disperse. The crowd was composed largely of young Kikuyu men and women, and the women began yelling, inciting the young men. The crowd moved towards the police party shouting threateningly. There were several obvious ring leaders, one of whom was known to be a Mau Mau adherent, who, backed by the taunts of the women, urged the crowd forward. But the real leadership appeared to come, amazingly, from a Kikuyu lad scarcely 18. I have seen this lad, now shackled in one of the private cells behind the police station, have tried to talk to him and had him pose willingly enough for a snapshot. He is small, chubby, with a face blank except for sheepish wavering eyes, and since his imprisonment he has not spoken at all.

Blackwell noted his influence with the crowd, saw him motioning and heard him screaming, ordered him arrested and taken to the police car. The youth struggled and shouted for the crowd to rescue him. The crowd surged closer in the face of warnings shouted by Blackwell and the other two Europeans and in spite of warning shots fired into the ground from two Sten guns, which only caused them to fall prone for a moment. When the edge of the crowd was five feet from the police lines, with a frenzied hysterical murmur rising from the mob center, all the police opened fire at Blackwell's command. Sten guns, which have a very rapid rate of fire, and full charge .303 service ammunition, which can shoot through three men, were used.

After a brief burst of fire, during which the principal Mau Mau leader was killed, the crowd lay prone on the short grass of the market place and did not move forward again. Many broke and ran away. Blackwell was able to form a cordon and to arrange the evacuation of the fifteen dead and twenty-nine wounded. Some 350 prisoners were taken back to Thika.

The preliminary police investigation revealed that the youth, who had been believed completely mute, had suddenly gained speech and announced a vision. The Kikuyu, thinking the youth supernaturally inspired, had gathered from far away trekking in to witness the events predicted in the vision. The

youth had said that the area around him would become a miracle ground, all bridges in the area would collapse, the buildings in the market place would move down the hill, all airplanes flying over the area would fall and God would arrive at 1 p.m.<sup>1</sup> The ring leaders, it is reported, had spread word through the crowd that any bullets fired at them would turn to water.<sup>2</sup>

In Thika the prisoners have been screened and most of them released by now. I saw the others crowded into an enclosure made of concertinas of barbed wire. The fifteen bodies had been heaped into a tractor-towed, deep-bedded farm wagon and carried to the hospital. The bodies, however, had to be identified, and besides being finger-printed and photographed, were looked at by the local tribal elders who had been ordered to Thika by the police. Through no fault of the police and due largely to the present false alarm this identification by sight was delayed.

I cannot possibly convey my own feelings seeing the corpses, still heaped in the wagon, bloated and stinking under a cloud of flies, with the elders - old men, their crinkly negro beards half grey - standing in their ragged European clothing on the hospital verandah thirty feet away. From time to time they looked at the wagon through the cracks of the rough boards where sunlight coming straight down traced the oily lines of already decomposing twisted legs, arms and naked torsos. And from the hospital rooms behind they could hear an occasional moan of the wounded being tended by a tired-faced, thin English nurse.

A working party had been busy some hundreds of yards away and 21 graves had been dug in a row. The laughing, chattering work party, like most East African labor, had dug the first grave large enough but as they moved down the line so that their straw boss could not measure the other graves by eye the holes had become smaller and smaller. This afternoon the wagon was driven over and the bodies were identified again by the elders and planted. The officer in charge was conscious of the situation and particularly of the effect which it must have had on these elders who may have been looking on the bodies of their grandchildren. But he had been fully occupied with the alarm and unable to check on the burial party he had sent down to the hospital hours earlier. This party, most likely out of dislike for the grizzly task, had "misunderstood" the instructions and had wandered off. The 21 graves had allowed a margin; only fifteen bodies had been brought in originally and two of the wounded died in the hospital. One of the vacant holes is available for a body found a few minutes ago in the river. The body was found laced with stout rope into tucked position with a rope tied to a stone to keep the head under the shallow water. Apparently cast into the water at the edge of the native reserve, the body was most likely that of an informer suspected by the Mau Mau.

1. The results of this investigation were first reported in a local East African Standard newsbroadcast last night. The East African Standard unquestionably has special news facilities here in Kenya since its publications frequently precede government news handouts by twelve to twenty-four hours.

2. This, of course, recalls the witch-doctor sparked Maji Maji rebellion of Tanganyika during the German administration. Natives were told then by witch-doctors that if they observed certain taboos and cleansed themselves by certain rituals and shouted "Maji Maji" (water, water) on going into battle the bullets of the Germans would turn to water. One of the first shots fired in this rebellion sent a single Mauser bullet through the bodies of two men. This did not halt the rebellion or destroy faith in spiritual immunity: the witch-doctors simply explained that the men had been unfaithful in observing the taboos and insincere during the ritual.

While all this took place on the green banks of the Thika River, scenically grand, as it moves down from the Aberdares, it is the grimmest day's experience I have had since the war. The activity around the police station, the grins, and soldierly, cheerful-front, wise-cracks of the Britishers, the resonant African chatter and laughter of the black policemen and even the prisoners, the restrained and grammatical narrative of the shooting by the young but very mature Blackwell - all emphasize the vitality and vigor of the people here. The equatorial setting, where a dry stick sprouts green, near game fields sprinkled with gazelle and antelope, seems to have a unity and single beauty of its own. It strikes me as an inexplicable cruelty that the people here are fated to live - black, white and brown - in separate, distinct and sometimes bitterly opposed worlds of their own.

But to get down to some immediate views.

One interpretation of events might be simply that a large number of young men had - as always since the women do most of the farm and other labor - a lot of spare time on their hands and found it entertaining to get together in a large crowd on Sunday. Sunday - their women's one day off - is the traditional time in East Africa for rural natives to assemble round the beer markets, often bringing in their own gourds filled with gallons of beer, and to sit down for a long drink. Later there would be dancing, and I have seen enough of these parties to know that the extemporaneous, warm-glowing feelings of the crowd could be turned in almost any direction, so long as it involved shouting, jumping up and down and running into the bushes with someone else's wife.

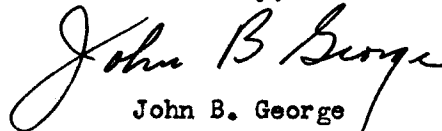
I do not think that this incident was so innocent. Police say that a large Mau Mau initiation ceremony was to take place and, of course, the crowd knew that such a large assembly, uncalled by government, was a flagrant breach of emergency regulations. A young Kikuyu girl, whom I saw in the prison when I saw the Kikuyu lad, called upon the people to remove their European clothes - a standard Mau Mau gesture. The ring leader who was killed was a known Mau Mau adherent. It is suspected that the lad's vision was nothing more than an utterance prompted by Mau Mau subversives in order to help them gather initiation recruits and to drive off the police and prevent their opening of a new permanent police post at Kirawara.

The gathering of the Kikuyu to see the events predicted in the youth's vision may hint that the Kikuyu in their real and fancied troubles feel the need for a Messiah. Though all the Kikuyu I have seen seem well-fed, there is no doubt that the reserves are crowded, that land is short and that this situation has been worsened recently by the influx into reserves of Kikuyus discharged all over East Africa by untrusting European employers. In a tribe where superstition always has been a dominant aspect of life there might be real solace in grasping at a possible symbol of Freedom and Light.

Another comment is that this incident may be the beginning of a period of firmer government handling of the situation. It is already being interpreted as such by some Europeans. Before driving to Thika, I visited May & Company, the old gun shop in Nairobi, to buy some revolver cartridges.

(Even cartridges are in short supply and they rationed me ten rounds of .38 specials. Another customer at the counter tried to buy my Smith & Wesson revolver (regular price \$40.00) for £60.) The talk around the gun counter dealt with this latest Kirawara incident, and the expressed feelings of the several Europeans there were "It's good. The only trouble is that they waited too long. They should have been shooting much earlier." Many of the Europeans with whom I have talked feel sincerely that the only possible way to deal with this terrorism, which has as its targets elderly couples and women, is to meet it with a greater, sterner terrorism - to instill in the Kikuyu a greater fear of European than of Mau Mau retribution. The government is not going to go this far, and this obviously is no solution to the long run Kenya problem, but I can see how it might commend itself to Europeans as the lesser of a very few unpleasant alternatives.

Sincerely,

  
John B. George

P.S. The Kikuyu population figure given in my newsletter entitled Mau Mau dated 8 November 1952 was copied out of Hailey's 1951 Native Administration in the British African Territories, Part I. I thought it small and on checking the East African Statistical Office's Tribal Studies I find the best estimate to be slightly over one million.

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