

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JBG-35  
Mau Mau Notes, Nyeri

Nyeri, Kenya  
30 November 1952

Mr. Walter S. Rogers  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
522 Fifth Avenue  
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

I am now in Nyeri which has been described as the center point of Mau Mau activity, although more recently the Thika area to the south and the Thompson's Falls area to the northwest have been more active. The reason for this relative decrease in trouble here is that a force of King's African Rifles, approximately three battalions, is now spread around Nyeri policing the scattered Kikuyu villages, with its headquarters in the town itself. This force is over and above a civilian reinforced complement of police, and it has been "beefed up" by the assignment of Kenya Regiment European officers and enlisted men.<sup>1</sup>

Let me describe the drive north from Thika. The roadway, though practically deserted at night, seems very normal during the day. I met a nearly normal amount of traffic coming south (mostly military or police, though), and had the typical opportunities of the owner of a four-wheel-drive vehicle to make friends along the way. It had rained the night previously and the hillside stretches were very slippery. A few low places were rutted and soft. One car which I pulled out of the mud was that of a full Colonel. He was wearing staff tabs and no organizational insignia, and I have not yet identified him by name, but will undoubtedly see him again.

At Fort Hall we stopped at an Indian duka where the Colonel bought my wife and me a beer. We spoke briefly with the Indian shop-owner, who was obviously worried, and he told us that chiefs and headmen were being threatened and two of them had been murdered recently. North of Fort Hall there had been little rain, but the two miles of mud had delayed me south of Nyeri until late afternoon. The town, really a small resort location for vacationers, big game sightseers and trout fishing enthusiasts, seemed normal enough.

I visited the military headquarters set up in the veterinary offices near the government headquarters. The occupancy of these veterinary quarters by military was meaningful, indicating the lessening of normal administrative services to the Kikuyu, whose cattle have been impounded in this area as collective punishment. The headquarters had a familiar atmosphere with its situation maps on the wall posted by two young staff officers and a signal officer reading situation reports. In an adjoining room a message center had been set up and a radio set kept whining Morse.

Roughly the local military setup is as follows. A force approximating in strength some three battalions is spread out around Nyeri on guard post assignments. These guard posts typically are of platoon strength, the company

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1. One influential settler confided to me that there was overlapping and lack of coordination between the three elements of army, police and civilian security. Both police and army might answer the same alarm and "it is just a question of who gets there first." This settler commends as an obvious solution the placing of all emergency operations in the area under a single individual.

headquarters being centrally located among its platoons and tied in with them by reliable radio or telephone connections. They send out patrols to investigate reports of Mau Mau incidents. There is a fairly well organized higher communications net which ties together the headquarters with all units and with an aerial observation team. The light airplanes keep searching the area for gatherings of Kikuyu. As at Thika the planes are normally up only during daylight, and observations are hampered by the thick cover in the forests of the Aberdares to the west and on the slopes of Mt. Kenya to the northeast. Any number of meetings, if gathered during the night, could take place concealed in the forests.

These smaller guard units are deemed capable of fighting off any force that the Kikuyu here might assemble. It might seem optimistic that an understrength platoon of some 30 men could take care of a crowd of 2000 size such as gathered at Thika, but the K.A.R. is an infantry organization with a complement of weapons considerably more deadly than an equivalent strength of police. The 15 killed and 29 wounded in the one burst of fire by police at Thika were a minimum number of casualties necessary to subdue the crowd. There has as yet been no opening of fire on a mob with intent to destroy, and no firing into a crowd by infantry. Had such been the case at Thika the casualties would have numbered hundreds. The Command at Nyeri is attempting to demonstrate by public exhibitions the deadly effect of Bren gun, rifle and mortar fire and to convey to the Kikuyu imagination the inadvisability of further mob violence. (In fairness I should say that I am thoroughly convinced that every possible restraint, even to the point of severe risk of suffering mob-inflicted casualties, is being observed by both army and police personnel.)

Despite all precautions there is an increasing fear that a more organized violence may occur. More weapons are being obtained by theft and robbery by the Kikuyu. A few days ago a .303 rifle and a .404 rifle were "stolen" from the hut of a native game scout, and almost every day there are further reports of stolen guns. The officer I spoke to yesterday morning at the headquarters, a husky young lieutenant with the marks of a veteran footballer on his nose and shins, told me that he felt these weapons might be finding their way into a common arsenal. This would be much more severe than the traditional poacher's dodge (which has bothered the game guards of the three territories for many years) of hiding a single rifle in a hollow log, where it eventually rusts away or is found. It would mean that incomplete weapons stolen with the bolts removed could be made complete again through cannibalization of parts of other weapons, and that ammunition of various types could be pooled and issued to arm a large band of terrorists. In this area at least the finding and recapture of stolen weapons is by no means keeping pace with the thefts.

It cannot be overemphasized that the Kikuyu are by Western standards a virtually unarmed civilian group with only a few shotguns. Earlier I mentioned that the whole situation might change if the Kikuyu could lay hands on a few hundred rifles. Their relative inaccessibility to smugglings of arms from abroad is a vital factor. If I were a ranking official inside the iron curtain, intent on discrediting the British in the colonies by any means, I should now be considering ways and means of dropping any kinds of weapons, explosives or devices of sabotage to Kikuyu dissidents. The Kikuyu are inland from the coast and separated from foreign borders north. Unless counter-subversive organizations

within Kenya are much better than I suspect, it would not be impossible to get a few truck loads of arms brought in. Chances of detection, however, would be great. If the far-fetched measure of dropping weapons from an aircraft flown from, say, Abyssinia were justified through the equally far-fetched existence of workable Soviet-Mau Mau contacts, the weapons would be likely to fall into the hands of the government anyway. As was the case with our own guerrilla operations in Burma officers would have to be dropped to teach the Kikuyus how to use firearms. In their hands pangas (native machetes) have proved more effective than firearms with which they frequently miss even at point blank range. This weapons situation alone would prevent Kenya from becoming "another Malaya."

I have asked several officers for views and have found them unanimous in their resentment of "restraints." The military are not allowed to act against collective groups even when they feel sure that a whole village are accessories after the fact in a murder. They must arrest only legitimate suspects who are turned over to civil authorities. They feel that the past lax policy of "indecision and mushy softness" has only served to make the native feel that he can get away with anything. Any collective punishment must come from civilian authorities, like the already mentioned collection of several thousand cattle from this area. The officers concede this has had a meaningful effect on the natives and want powers to act similarly on their own. The natives, they say, fully expected the cattle to be returned and have been convinced to some degree by the selling of half the cattle that the government "is beginning to mean business."

Settlers here, angry at the murders and the slaughtering of livestock, seem generally to share the feelings of the military. The wife of one settler, a young woman I met in the Outspan Hotel, was a marked exception, saying that she felt the Kikuyu were being treated too roughly by police. I later heard this woman described by a more typical settler as a "London School of Economics type" who invited Kikuyu women into her home to use her bath and announced freely that she would not at all mind the marriage of her children to Kikuyus. She and her husband are not settlers in the sense of owning a farm. They have come here very recently to manage a farm, and among my acquaintances are almost unique in this colony.

It is worth emphasizing that settlers here are not panicked. They are aware of the danger of attack and they have armed themselves. We had dinner at a settler's home with three handguns kept ready at the table. With guns ready, they go on running their business and they go on enjoying life, accepting the present insecurity with humor and calm.

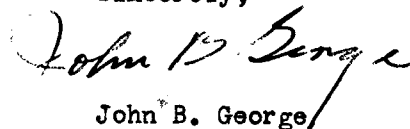
General settler opinion was probably behind the European elected members who launched their severest criticism yet of government policy in the Legislative Council on Tuesday (November 25). Mr. N.F. Harries, the European elected member for Nairobi South, declared "there is a feeling abroad in the country" that the government "is not enforcing the powers taken with the necessary resolution," and is failing to win the confidence of the loyal people in the Kikuyu reserves - which the government agrees is most necessary. The loyal Kikuyu still felt it was better to risk the punishment of the government and attend Mau Mau ceremonies rather than risk the deadlier wrath of the Mau Mau. He and Mr. Slade, the European representative from the Aberdares district, insisted there was too much

emphasis on the law of the land and not enough on the spirit of justice and the requirements of these times. They had tried to impose a criminal law and procedure developed over 2,000 years on people with only 60 years of development who did not appreciate any punishment they did not see and know to have been inflicted. Mr. Slade cited that the people of England, even after they had progressed far beyond the present state of the Kikuyu tribe, had been kept in order and law abiding by such punishments as the whip and pillory. The government had to be goaded into a sense of urgency and drop its present academic approach, Mr. Harries asserted. "What we want is good, quick justice, appreciated by the lawbreakers." He felt that commanding officers of military and police patrols should have complete discretion as to when to open fire and that Mau Mau oath ceremonies were incitements to rebellion and should be regarded as such and fired upon without warning whenever seen.

In order to be welcomed in these times by Kenya whites, a speech by a councilman must demand the strongest anti-disorder measures by government. A less aggressive speech by Michael Blundell, the leader of European Members in Legislative Council, was condemned by a Nyeri barroom acquaintance of mine as "feeble if opening a flower show in Sussex."

But to repeat a point, this talk of firmness is not a sign of undue, confused fear. I have talked with any number of Europeans - police, military, and civilian, including a young Cambridge-schooled administrative officer who has been and is living alone in the reserves with Kikuyus, organizing "resistance groups" to the Mau Mau. They all are calm, if not confident, and, as a people conditioned to insecurity by the Battle of Britain and associated trials, they really regard the Mau Mau as a serious annoyance with which they can cope.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "John B. George". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the typed name.

John B. George

Received New York 12/9/52.