

News feature



KENYA has recently been gripped by terror and violence, but News Letter reporter **KATE CHAMBRÉ** recalls her experiences of teaching there during more peaceful times ...



SMILES: left, Kate is welcomed to a Masai Mara home and, above, relaxes with pupils at Itigo Girls' School in the Kenyan Rift Valley where she was a teacher, right



Kenyan people torn apart by tribal hatred

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Deaths

WATT — January 9, 2008 (suddenly) at Hospital, Annie May, beloved wife of Noel, loved mother of Margaret, Martin, Isaac and the late William, mother-in-law of Hugh and Roisin and loving granny of Mark, Rachel, Jenna and Conor. Funeral leaving Garvin's Funeral Home, 15 Ballyronan Road, Magherafelt, to-morrow (Friday) at 1.30 pm to St Lurach's Parish Church, Maghera for service followed by burial in the adjoining churchyard. House strictly private. Family flowers only please. Donations in lieu, if desired, to HDU, Mid-Ulster Hospital, Clo Garvin's Funeral Service Donations A/c (address as above). Will be sadly missed by her sorrowing Husband and all the Family.

WATT — (née Peoples) January 9, 2008, Annie May, loved sister of Elma, Rye, Sadie, Sonny, Gerald and the late Clark and Pearl. Deeply regretted by the family circle. "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away."

Acknowledgements

DUNBAR — Norman. The family of the late Norman Dunbar, would like to thank all who sympathised with them in their recent sad bereavement. To all who called at our home, sent cards, gave donations to N.I. Hospice. Special thanks to Rev Spencer Gilchrist for his very comforting words on his visits during Norman's illness and at the funeral service, also to all the doctors and nurses on ward CS, Antrim Area Hospital, district nurses from Randalstown Health Centre, Dr Doyle and Dr Moss, Antrim Health Centre and Bairds Funeral Directors. Trusting this acknowledgement will be accepted by all as a token of our appreciation.

B EING dropped off in Eldoret bus park in western Kenya as a naive 19-year-old girl was without doubt the first culture shock I truly experienced in life.

Finding myself surrounded by hundreds of matatu (taxi) drivers all vying for my business, I could not help but notice the large bundles of second-hand clothing strewn across the nearby pavements. The clothes had been sent there from aid agencies.

While I acclimatised to my new surroundings, the occasional small kid would look up at me and scream in horror, having never seen a "wazungu" (white person) before.

It was 1998 and I had travelled to eastern Africa from Northern Ireland to spend eight months teaching in two schools located in different parts of Kenya.

The experience I gained I count as among the happiest and most fulfilling periods of my life to date.

The first school I taught at was a large provincial all-girls school situated in the Rift Valley near Eldoret, the second was a small co-educational primary in the heart of the Masai Mara where I delivered lessons to small children in tin shacks with elephants, lions and other wildlife roaming just a stone's throw away.

I should add that none of these children spoke English or Swahili, but Masai, their tribal language.

Teaching at Itigo Girls' School taught me what real poverty was. I lived without electricity, running water or a toilet where I slept and existed on a diet of ugali (maize), beans and rice.

If I wanted to wash or cook I fetched water from the tap outside and if I wanted to go to the toilet I used a long-drop loo in a field.

But this was luxury in comparison to the 400-plus schoolgirls who had just a handful of long-drop loos between them and were crammed into dormitories as if they were cattle in a shed.

Every morning the girls got up at 5am to milk the cows and



LESSONS: Kate with a colleague and children she taught

later in the day, after their lessons, they were set to work outside - planting vegetables or chopping wood.

If they misbehaved they would be caned and if they longed for home it was too bad. They would just have to wait until term ended.

The school was situated in an extremely remote region surrounded by deep-red ochre roads. Some of the world's top long-distance runners hail from there.

Despite such poverty, however, the Kenyan children and adults I met in the Rift Valley and throughout the country appeared to be happy people with a great faith in God and the little they had.

Song and dance; beautiful smiling faces; having my hair, skin and face poked and pulled by curious children; the vibrant colour of the landscape; being crammed into matatus with chickens to my left and babies to my right and travelling precariously along the dusty Kenyan roads are among the memories that will never leave me.

As I write, the tribal warfare

continues in Kenya following the allegedly rigged elections of December 17.

It makes me physically sick to think that I may have taught some of the people who were so cruelly burnt to death in the Assemblies of God Church close to the town of Eldoret recently, in the midst of the election fall-out. Simply because they belonged to the wrong tribe.

At least 40 more bodies were later found a few miles from the church, in the grounds of the Kaptein tea estate, many of them displaying machete wounds.

The death toll is rising by the day among Kenya's poorest, threatening to tarnish the country's reputation as one of Africa's most promising democracies and strongest economies.

Well over 500 people have lost their lives so far and hundreds of women and children have been savagely attacked and raped. Thousands more have been displaced from their homes.

It's understood the majority of victims have been members of President Mwai Kibaki's Kikuyu tribe, many of whom



VICTIM: Margaret Wambui survived the Assemblies of God atrocity
Picture: AP Photo

have been attacked in Nairobi's slums by other ethnic groups that support Raila Odinga, his Luo challenger.

Kenya's tourism industry, which brings in some £455 million a year, is likely to be affected by the unrest. Tourism attracts more than one million visitors a year. Many of them are from Northern Ireland.

Augusta Nicholson, from Co Down, plans to travel to Kenya with her husband next month for a three-week holiday.

She told the News Letter that they have not been deterred from going, despite the unrest.

Augusta said: "Obviously, in a month's time if we are told not to go we will have to review the situation. We went to Kenya over 34 years ago on our honeymoon and travelled 2,000 miles around the country on our own by car."

She added: "We are looking forward to seeing how it has changed, but somehow I doubt very much we'll be able to drive anywhere on our own once we get there."

Armagh woman Rosemarie White, who was born and brought up in Kenya, is travelling there later this month with her husband.

Rosemarie said: "Travelling on the roads round Nairobi is difficult because there are numerous police road blocks and people are uncertain of

security.

"I am not afraid to go to Kenya because I have family living there who haven't advised us not to go. If they advised us not to, obviously we wouldn't go."

She said people of all ethnic backgrounds who live there are keeping a low profile and are not travelling about at present.

"Since the elections were announced everyone has closed up shop and are waiting to see how things turn out," she said.

However, Mrs White believes the news media has a lot to answer for: "The media has certainly fuelled tensions. I feel that those who are stirring up the violence are enjoying playing to the cameras and the journalists and looking for an excuse to go on the rampage."

She added: "Hopefully commonsense will prevail and the situation will return to normal and tourists will continue to go to Kenya on holiday, because so many Kenyan people depend on tourism for their livelihood."

They say when you first go to Africa it gets under your skin and you'll want to return again and again.

That certainly was the case for me and I have returned to different parts of the continent many times since.

I sincerely hope the recent turmoil in Kenya will not deter tourists from visiting, because despite the political tensions, in my view it is one of the most beautiful countries on this planet.

In tomorrow's News Letter: a Hillsborough resident's first-hand account of the current situation in Kenya