

THE LAIKIPIA HIGHLANDS GAMES

SPORTS FOR PEACE

The Laikipia Highlands, in Kenya's North Rift region, where several pastoralist tribes used to coexist peacefully, has in recent years been the theatre of cattle rustling, tribal clashes, raids and insecurity. This, coupled with the proliferation of small weapons and rampant unemployment due to lack of work opportunities, and dwindling grazing resources has made cattle rustling a way of life for Pokot and neighbouring Samburu, Turkana, Borana, Tugen and Njemps youth and a severe threat to stability in the region.

Many communities have been severely affected and displaced, homesteads burnt, thousands of livestock stolen and hundreds of people, including women and children, killed in the clashes. The most severe drought experienced over nearly two generations has exacerbated the tension, has put well over 10 million people in Kenya at risk of starvation, and access to water and pasture have become an added bone of contention.

The Gallmann Memorial Foundation (GMF), dedicated to the coexistence of people and nature in Africa, has been involved in community services, peace and reconciliation efforts for many years. For over two months we hosted two hundred women and children refugees of the Njemps tribe displaced in the 2005 clashes, acted as a mediator at the beginning of tribal clashes between Samburu and Pokot, organising and hosting several elders meetings in 2006, hosted a week long peace meeting amongst Sudan youth in 2007, and organized several poignant healing peace seminars for victims and perpetrators of political post-election violence in 2008.

The Great Rift Valley Trust (GRVT) aims to bridge differences between world peoples by finding common denominators and pursuits such as art, music, sports and environment, at humankind's common cradle. Both GMF and GRVT are based and operating at Laikipia Nature Conservancy- a vast wildlife sanctuary

and biodiversity oasis situated on the edge of Kenya's Great Rift valley, boundary to six warring community, on the Western Laikipia Highlands- a region severely affected by tribal conflicts.

Both the Gallmann Memorial Foundation and the Great Rift Valley Trust have been since January 2009, at the forefront of providing food relief for the peoples of Western Laikipia, East Baringo and East Pokot. An estimated 28,000 women and children and elders have been fed since, and the programme is ongoing.

Sports as a means to promoting peace dates back from the times of the first Olympics and has recently been recognized by the United Nations as a powerful tool to promote reconciliation.

The Laikipia Highlands games, - born in October 2008 as joint venture of the GMF and GRVT- is a new annual sporting initiative aimed to use the fundamental values of sport in fostering good will, build relations, bridge divisions, and harness the natural competitive spirit of youth and the recognized high potential of Kenya Highlands athletes, to engage in peaceful competitions that put their fitness to test, at the same time offering unique opportunities to emerging new athletes.

A Tugen boy, Jacob Kurere, and a Turkana girl, Agnes Lopeyok have been identified in fact last year by spotters from the Olympic Committee of Kenya, as potential champions and have been offered training at the Kipchoge Keino High Altitude Performance Centre in Eldoret. They will be groomed for the coming London Olympics.

The games are an unusual and exciting combination of modern athletics and colourful traditional tribal games played amongst African tribes since generations.

On the 16th of September 2009, however, three days before the date set for the second edition of The Laikipia Highlands games, youth from one tribe attacked

sleeping women and children at dawn in Kainampio manyatta in north Laikipia. 22 women and children were killed in their sleep; young warriors retaliated and soon dozens of people lay dead. On 17th of September the women and children were buried in a mass grave in an emotional ceremony.

At the request of the community the games went ahead.

A staggering 1175 entries were recorded. Thousands of people attended.

Happening at this very time and opened by our nursery school children waiving flags inscribed with the Kiswahili word for peace -AMANI- and attended by all the tribes involved in the recent clashes, the 2009 edition of the Laikipia Highlands games saw the enthusiastic participation of athletes, schools children, women, elders and diverse tribal youth dressed in their traditional attire-. By giving contending tribes and communities involved in tragic disputes at the present time an opportunity to meet in neutral ground, the Games were a tremendous tribute to the healing influence of sport, and a poignant reminder of the power of the human spirit to overcome.

Paul Tergat, one of Kenya's finest athletes and former world record holder in the 10,000 meters and marathon said "this is a very unique event that brings warring communities together through sport in the most unique setting. It is indeed the Kenya that we want. It is also a great way to tap talent amongst these communities and at the same time, encouraging them to conserve nature and protect the wildlife in that unique part of Kenya".

While last year proceeds helped the ongoing construction of a sports arena in the area of West Laikipia for the local youth, amongst other educational pursuits, this year focused on drought alleviation and famine relief.

By combining Peace and Sport across such a tremendous array of tribes and communities currently involved in conflict, and by offering their youth the only

opportunity to interact, The Laikipia Highlands Games- is crucial to the development of a peace process in the area.

Kuki Gallmann,
Founder,
The Laikipia Highlands Games