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# Crisis leaves guilty stain on the west

By Michael Holman

**A**s western leaders scramble to prevent Kenya's descent into chaos they should find time to consider their own failure to respond to a crisis that has been long in the making.

Seldom has an African tragedy been signalled so far in advance. And seldom have western policymakers been so complicit in a crisis that is turning into Kenya's catastrophe. For the past three years the international donor community, led by the World Bank and supported by the International Monetary Fund, have ignored the warning signs and knowingly backed one of Africa's most corrupt regimes.

For the outside world, Kenya has been the acceptable face of Africa: a safe destination for a million tourists a year from Europe, Asia and North America to the country of surf and safari; a reliable base, in a tough neighbourhood, for a burgeoning aid industry; regional headquarters for the United Nations; and – less well-known – a country whose military pacts with the US and Britain have made it a crucial ally in the “war against terror”.

Kenyan politics, however, has never been healthy. It has been dominated by ethnic allegiances, stained by assassination, distorted by one-party rule until 1991 and, above all, oiled by endemic corruption.

When Mwai Kibaki swept into power in December 2002, ending Daniel arap Moi's kleptocratic era, he was regarded not primarily as a member of the Kikuyu, Kenya's largest tribe. Rather, he was seen as a reformer who led a coalition that promised clean government.

The euphoria that united the country was short-lived. On a mid-winter day in London in early February 2005, John Githongo, the man whom Mr Kibaki had appointed Kenya's anti-corruption chief, and himself a Kikuyu, chose exile in Britain rather than staying silent at home.

For the first time in Africa's post-independence history, an insider was ready to reveal how corruption worked – with evidence that included secretly taped conversations with cabinet ministers.

Not only were Britain and other aid donors given an opportunity to tackle corruption, using as leverage aid that exceeds \$16bn since independence in 1963. It was also a chance to

ask some tough questions about how that money has been spent.

If aid has worked in Kenya, how do development agencies explain the growing pauperisation of its people? In 1990 about 48 per cent of the population was living below the poverty line. Today, more than four decades after independence, nearly 55 per cent of Kenyans are subsisting on a couple of dollars a day.

And for all the 6 per cent annual gross domestic product growth achieved in the past two years under Mr Kibaki, the gap between the haves and the have-nots is widening. To see the crisis only in terms of tribal allegiances and ethnic clashes is to miss a vital element in the Kenyan picture. The population has doubled in 25 years to 31m. Unemployment is growing, and the number without land is growing. For these people there is nothing to lose by taking to the streets, driven by frustration and fury that transcend their tribe.

Alas for Kenya, the bank, the fund and leading bilateral donors such as Britain chose not to act on Mr Githongo's evidence. Instead, it has been business as usual. In the case of DFID, the UK development agency, aid flows have in fact risen – from £30m in 2003-04 to £50m in 2005-06.

So why did the donors duck away from this unique opportunity to tackle graft?

The truth is, they never had the stomach for a fight. They did not believe it was ultimately in their interests to have a showdown with the barons of corruption. They did not want to upset what they saw as a regional “island of stability” from which the UN and other international relief agencies, including hundreds of foreign non-governmental organisations, operate – a thriving business that accounts for a fifth of Kenya's annual foreign exchange earnings.

Weighing in the balance are the longstanding military agreements Kenya has signed with the US and the UK, which have assumed particular importance since President George W. Bush launched his war on terrorism.

Not for the first time, an African country is paying a terrible price for the tolerance of its corrupt government by its western partners.

*The writer, former Financial Times Africa editor, is author of Last Orders at Harrods (Abacus), set in Kenya*

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