

COVER STORY

# ALL I WANT IS JUSTICE, NOT REVENGE

Nothing can compensate Ruth Njeri for the suffering she underwent during the post-election violence, but she hopes that ICC prosecutor Luis Moreno Ocampo's visit to Kenya last week will ensure that those behind the bloodshed are punished.

By MANPREET REHAL



Even before International Criminal Court prosecutor Luis Moreno-Ocampo came to Kenya last week, displaced people had been pleading with the government to increase the promised compensation sum. But for people like Ruth Njeri, monetary compensation is not enough. Njeri, who lives in Shalom City Mawingu, a camp for displaced people near Nyandarua, was raped and her husband brutally killed during the post-election violence. The painful memories haunt her as she worries about providing for her two young children.

"We want to see justice being done," she says, "As far as we are concerned, the future of this country lies in Ocampo's hands and we want him to know that thousands of people are looking to him for justice and also to ensure that this country does not have a similar experience such as the one that stole our loved ones and our livelihoods!"

Talk of the violence evokes gruesome memories for Njeri as politicians worry about the fate of those who

masterminded the post-election violence. "What happened cannot be wiped from my mind, and life has been hell for me," says Njeri quietly. "When we gather in the camp to discuss the issue, our main hope is that Ocampo will not allow politicians to convince him to let them off. We want him to conduct investigations so that the individuals involved can be charged and tried at The Hague, not in Kenya, because we have no confidence in the government."

Before all hell broke loose in January 2008, Ruth was living in Kericho with her husband and eight-month-old son, Douglas. Her husband owned a thriving shoe business and provided well for the family.

"That evening, my husband heard about the looting going on in town and decided to go and check whether his shop had also been broken into," she recalls. "I had prepared the evening meal and decided to do the laundry as I waited for him. When he came back, he was very shaken. He told me that the shop had been looted, but I told him that since it was happening all around, we should not worry too much because after things calmed down, we would work hard to regain what we had lost."

**Phone call**  
Njeri's husband then went on to reveal that he had received a phone call from a friend in Londiani, where his parents lived. "He said he had been told that both his parents had been killed and buried in a mass grave," she says, "I could see that even as he spoke, he didn't believe what he was saying. He also told me that he had seen hundreds of youths wearing white T-shirts and red



Left: Ruth Njeri with her children Douglas and Miracle. Above: Life in a camp is difficult Photo/JOSEPH KIHARI AND FILE

shorts being brought to the town in a lorry. When the phone rang again, I answered it, and what he had told me was confirmed. We were advised to go into hiding as soon as possible to save our lives."

Still in a daze, Njeri left her husband watching the evening news while holding their son and went outside to hang the washing. Out of nowhere, an arrow landed next to her foot and then she heard a strange sound. She looked up to see the low walls of the compound surrounded by painted faces.

"They were howling like dogs and were dressed in white T-shirts and red shorts," she recalls. "I stood rooted to the ground with fear, knowing that these were the men my husband had referred to earlier. About seven of the men entered the compound and began kicking and pushing me into the house while the rest went away."

Once inside the house, they took the little boy from Njeri's husband and flung him against the wall. They then attacked her husband. "They were prepared and well-armed," recalls Njeri. "They had machetes, runguns, arrows and whips. I cried for mercy, then pleaded, but they would not listen. I ran to the bedroom and got them Sh40,000. I begged them to take the money and leave us but they just laughed. One of them snatched the money from me, smelt it and threw it in my face. He reached into his pockets and pulled out many Sh1,000 notes, 'We don't need your money, we have been paid well to do our job,'" he said.

"My husband cried out, telling me to look after our son — if we survived. I felt helpless as I watched them beat him ruthlessly," recalls Njeri, tears welling up in her eyes. One of the men came and brandished a panga in

her face before using it to slash her husband's neck. "They laughed. One of them picked my son from the floor, held him by his feet and then dropped him head first."

But they weren't done yet. Next, the men dragged Ruth into the next room, kicking and slapping her. "One cut me slowly and deliberating above my knee while another, who was smoking, burnt my thighs with a cigarette butt several times," she says, lifting her skirt to reveal the scars. Njeri was barely conscious when they began raping her in turns. But she

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remembers that each one would finish with her then help himself to some of the food she had cooked. Her last memory of that night is of the men pouring hot water on her naked body before leaving her for dead.

Nearly three days later, Njeri regained consciousness in hospital but had no idea how she got there. After recovering a little, she joined the hundreds of displaced people at the local district officer's compound, where she was reunited with her son, who had miraculously survived. Over the next few days, they were transported in lorries to the Nakuru Showground, where they would receive food and shelter.

"At the showground I met several women who had also lost everything," she says. "But that didn't make my loss any easier to bear. However, we all agreed that our politicians had turned the elections into a battle for power and used tribal tensions to disturb the peace in the country and the safety of the very people they claimed to speak for. It was the ultimate

betrayal."

Unknown to Njeri, the attack would continue to haunt her in other ways. A couple of months after the incident, she reported to the health clinic within the camp that she has missed her period. She was tested, but the medical staff were evasive about the results although they continued counselling her. After six months, Njeri wanted to terminate the pregnancy but was not allowed to.

"I wondered how I could have a child whose father I did not even know, and who would be a constant reminder of my humiliation," she offers. "I tried to convince the authorities to let me have an abortion but they said it was too late. They told me not to hate the child because it was part of me, and that it was innocent."

Due to the damage to her body after the gang-rape, Njeri couldn't give birth normally. Apart from special counselling, she also received clothing, food and medical aid before the baby was delivered through a Caesarian section.

"I couldn't bring myself to look at the baby or hold her," she recalls. "Several of my companions and the nurses tried to convince me but I was angry, bitter and helpless. I wondered why this had to happen to me. I knew many other women who had been raped during the violence, but why was I so ill-fated as to fall pregnant with a rapist's child?"

"It is God's will, breastfeed your child and your love for her will flow," Njeri repeats the words of an old woman at the hospital who understood what she was going through. "On the third day I breastfed the baby, Miracle Wanjiru, for the first time, and the bond of love broke the regret of how she had been conceived." Miracle is now an active 14-month-old baby.

Although the government is trying to resettle the displaced people, thousands like Njeri are still languishing in camps. Food and water are scarce, medical help is inadequate and diseases like cholera, typhoid, pneumonia and malnutrition continue to take their toll. Worst affected are young children and the elderly. Njeri and

her children have been admitted to public wards at the local hospital several times for various infections.

"We know that some people have already been resettled on the plots promised by the government, but we wish they would speed things up and provide the compensation money quickly."

Njeri has made no attempt to go back to Kericho because she feels there is nothing left to go back to. She works as a casual labourer on farms near the camp to pay for food for her family. Sometimes they sleep hungry because there is no food or no fuel to cook with. Their tent is leaking and when it rains, everything gets soaked. The nights are cold and several times her few belongings have been stolen by other desperate people.

Njeri finds herself swinging between depression and the will to rebuild her life. "At times I look at our condition and wonder whether it will ever end, or what kind of punishment this is," she cries. "Then I look at others who are worse off... for women who were raped and contracted Aids, it is a sure death sentence. Then I count my blessings and console myself that although I lost my husband and my property, I still have the son of the man I loved, and I consider Wanjiru a blessing and another reason for me to live."

Njeri is eager to receive her parcel of land and compensation money because it will help her rebuild her life. She also needs money to seek treatment for her back and pelvis, which were injured when she was assaulted. Her son also suffered an injury in his private parts that needs to be corrected surgically.

**Suffering**  
"Nothing can wipe out our suffering and no amount of money can compensate what we have lost, that is why we want justice, not vengeance," asserts Njeri, wiping away her tears. "We want the perpetrators of these heinous crimes brought to justice, and the only way that can be done is through the ICC. We don't want the politicians linked to these crimes to get off scot-free. We have seen criminals in high places walk away free when tried locally. We cannot allow them to continue living in luxury while thousands of innocent *wananchi* continue to live in squalid camps. These people have to answer to us and to the world for the crimes they committed. Aren't we all human beings at the end of the day? If Kenya is to be saved from the crimes of these power-hungry politicians who can go to any length for personal gain, the government has to set a precedent and allow the ICC to do its work to ensure that nothing like this ever happens again here, or anywhere else," she says passionately.

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LIVING POSITIVELY

## When it come to love we're all the same

There's more to a relationship than having the same sero status

They say opposites attract, but I'll never know how true this is because I've never been in an HIV sero-discordant relationship. However, I know several real opposites, one HIV-positive and the other negative, who haven't allowed this virus to affect their relationship.

I think age is catching up with me fast. Richard is several years younger than me, but that didn't stop us from falling in love. However, as with all relationships, there were times when I felt it would have been nice to know what he was really thinking. I mean, whether he was comfortable.

I didn't want our HIV sero-positive status to be the only thing that brought us together, because this shouldn't be the only basis for love. When it comes to love, people behave the same, and it doesn't mean, for instance, that someone who shares my HIV status will hurt me less than a person who doesn't. Perhaps, just perhaps, that is the only thing we share.

I always advise people who come to me for counselling — torn between loving someone they don't share an HIV status with and another they share a sero status with — that they should think things through. Don't rush. Love hurts, whether you're HIV-positive, negative or ignorant. However, it can be a huge emotional burden, trying to deal with the hurts of sero-conversion, plus the deep pain of an intimate relationship gone sour.

My relationship with Richard is constantly being tested, but we're determined to make it work. This year alone, we've had lots of fights, which I think neither of us has won. All I can say is that out of every 101 arguments, we agree on only one item. And the issues we argue about? Some are important, others downright silly. In fact, people would be surprised to know the kind of things we argue about, which lead to days of 'cold war'.

Sometimes I ask myself: "If one of us were HIV-negative, would we still be in this relationship?" It's hard to answer because in my view, love has to be stronger than pride and HIV.

I'm thankful for the emotional support I get from Richard. With the kind of work I'm doing, it's hard to know if people — family, friends or even total strangers seeking funds — love me for who I am or because of how deep I can dig in my wallet when they send an SOS. Richard is different. I share my life and deepest secrets and fears with him, and he loves me just as I am.

I'm a suspicious person, and at times I think the drugs we take to fight this virus play silly games with our systems. There's nothing such as a free lunch, and maybe this is the price some of us have to pay for the longevity and relatively healthy life that some of these medications grant us. At times it pains me to see women my age, or even older, looking like a million bucks. I've come to accept that I may have the resources, but, unfortunately, my resources aren't reading from the same script as my genes. I've not resigned to fate, though.

"Will Richard still love me when, God forbid, this virus takes its toll and the meat is gone from my bones? When the worst happens, will I still be sexy to him?" These are some of the tough questions I keep asking myself because I've seen what this virus does when the curtains start falling. I believe that, because we're in similar shoes, he'll keep it real. I don't know about you, but I'd rather be rejected right now, when I have the strength to get up and leave, than when I'm down and almost out.

"And will I still love and look good to myself when, to other people, there's nothing to love and everything looks bad?" This is the most important question I've asked myself in a long while. And that's because love starts with yours truly, with what the late Michael Jackson would have called "the woman in the mirror".

This is the diary of Asunta Wagura, a mother of two who tested positive more than 20 years ago. She is the executive director of the Kenya Network of Women with Aids (KENWA).