**Banditry**

**speeds up**

**spread**

**of Aids**

KARAMA Isiolo, Tuesday

Once considered some of the

"safest grounds" in Kenya, pastoral

areas are now bearing the

brunt of the HIV*/*Aids pandemic.

That the infection rate in this

Eastern Province of Kenya district,

which was three per cent

four years ago, is now estimated

to be between 20 and 30 per cent

is worrying. Aids is a fatal disease

spreading extremely fast in

the district, states the District Development

Plan for the period

1997-200l.

The situation has been exacerbated

by banditry, which has become

synonymous with the

northern frontier districts of

Kenya. In what appears to be a

systematised way of dehumanising

their victims, bandits not only

loot property and drive away

livestock when they strike, but

they also rape women, children

and men!

"Aids infected bandits have

passed on the dreaded HIV virus

to women, children and men

alike during their sporadic raids

in the district," a nurse at the

Isiolo District Hospital, Mrs Pauline

Kinyua, says.

Out of every five women and

children raped during the last one

and a half years, she says, two

have been infected with sexually

\_transmitted diseases (STDs), including

HIV ..

The youngest recorded rape

victim was a four-year-old girl,

while the oldest was a 72-yearold

grandmother, says Ms Kinyua,

who is attached to a home

for people with Aids and orphans,

.known as "Pepo la Tu"

maini Jangwani" (PT1), Kiswahili

for "Wind of Hope in the

Wilderness".

The story of Fatuma (not real

name), who was simultaneously

raped with her mother by a group

of bandits, is spine-chilling.

According to Ms Kinyua, the

12-year-old girl now suffers from

a chronic STD and fears that, like

her mother, she may have been

infected with HIV.

Another PTJ resident (name

withheld), whose wife has since

died of Aids, describes how his

wife was raped in his presence in

the middle of last year by bandits

who also forcefully had anal sex

with him as their two young children

watched. "I tried to fight them off but I

was overpowered," says the sickly man, who has since, tested HIV

positive. "My wife had persistent

vaginal bleeding after the ordeal

until she died seven months

later. "

Banditry in this district has

caused untold suffering to locals

including murder, rape, abduction,

torture, looting and arbitrary

arrests.

According to Mr Dabar Abdi

Maalim of the Department of

Public Health, Moi University, in

a previous interview with IRIS,

bandit activities in northern

Kenya are clearly commercial,

with violence and terror geared

towards achieving maximum

monetary gain.

Bandits

The current brand of banditry

is geared towards robbing victims

of their property, especially land.

Those interviewed by IRIS noted

that bandits are using crude dehumanising

methods such as rape

and sodomy to break families and

force them out of their land.

"It is embarrassing to be

stripped naked together with your

wife and children and be raped in

turns! Whenever this happens,

members of the affected family

scatter in different directions, unable

to endure the ordeal," Mr

Abdi Isaak, a local resident, says.

The government should step in

and arrest the situation immediately,

pleads Mr Isaak. "How can we

be made women as the state

watches?" the embittered 40-

year-old-man asked.

On the other hand., the deceptively

low incidence of reported

cases of Aids among pastoral

communities of eastern and

north-eastern Kenya has duped

locals into complacency as the

deadly virus runs amok.

"Most people still believe that

Aids is a disease of urban non pastoral

people, and unless this

notion is corrected, the disease is

going to wipe us out in a very

short period," warns Mrs Khadija

Rama, PTJ founder.

Mrs Rama adds that the local

community has turned a deaf ear

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*Pepo la Tumaini Jangwani* (Wind of Hope in the Wilderness), a home for people with Aids and orphans in the outskirts of Isiolo Town. (Pictures by JOSEPH THUO)

Some of the displaced children and Aids orphans who live at Pepo la Tumaini Jangwani in Isiolo, North Eastern Province