New study grapples with health effects of low-intensity warfare

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For nearly two decades, Ivy Pike, an associate professor of anthropology at the University of Arizona, has been studying ethnic groups in rural northern Kenya to understand how violence shapes the health of those eking out a living there.

The results of her and her colleagues' research," Documenting the health consequences of endemic warfare in three pastoralist communities of northern Kenya: A conceptual framework," is currently published in a special edition of *Social Science and Medicine*, in collaboration with the British medical journal the *Lancet* and the *Journal of the Danish Medical Association*.

These studies also set the stage for Global Response 2010, an international conference on violent conflict and health worldwide. The conference begins Jan. 22 in Copenhagen and is geared for humanitarian workers, physicians, political leaders and academicians working on violence and health.

Pike said their paper offers a "conceptual framework that lays out the importance of methods and approaches to document violence." While considerable research has documented social responses to the ongoing and chronic warfare among groups, there is much less data on how conflict affects community health.

Pike has been studying three nomadic communities - the Pokot, Samburu and Turkana. Like other groups that live in northen Kenya, all

are pastoralists, herding cattle, goats, sheep and camels between pasture and water. The region, about the size of Texas, has virtually no infrastructure. Literacy hovers at between 7 and 8 percent.

For hundreds of years, friction between these groups has centered largely on access to scarce grazing and water, and by livestock theft. Persistent drought over the last several years has raised tensions all the more, aggravated further by the introduction of firearms, especially automatic weapons in recent years.

Pike said that households she first studied in the early 1990s that might have had military-issue rifles, by mid-decade all had AK-47s.

"It's easy to treat this violence as cattle rustling, but it's much more complicated, with disparate impacts on people's daily lives and health," Pike said.

"We're documenting nutritional change over time. That's important because families that are nomads are very dependent on their livestock, so any shift in holdings or their animals' access to food and water impacts food security," she said.

While young men are killed or wounded by gunfire in raids, Pike said women and children also bear a considerable load from the violence. "The tendency is to say more young men are dying, but I can't substantiate that at this point. It looks like the fallout for women and children is just as high."

Men generally have better health because they travel with the herds and consequently have better access to meat and milk. Women will sacrifice to feed their children and older women will protect young mothers. All women will forego food when their children are hungry. This makes women an important barometer of health and well-being, especially

when their specific group has born the brunt of a violent attack.

Still, there is almost no data on the links between violence and armed conflict to shifts in health. Pike said pursuing this line of research has implications for many of the under-developed and developing regions of the world, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, where violence has increased dramatically related to displaced populations.

Source: University of Arizona (news : web)