

WAJIR, KENYA · FEBRUARY 1984

THE AIRSTRIP AT WAGALLA

*Five Days in the Sun,
and the Massacre Kenya Tried to Forget*

THE STATE SAID 57. THE SURVIVORS SAID THOUSANDS.



GRAHAM KASINDO

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*For the men and boys of Wagalla,
and the families who are still waiting.*



*“Naked, hungry, and thirsty, watching as life ebbed out
of his father.”*

— A Wagalla survivor’s account, as recorded after the massacre

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Prologue

WAGALLA AIRSTRIP, WAJIR. FEBRUARY 1984.

The airstrip was nine miles west of Wajir town: a strip of hard, bare ground in the semi-desert of the North East, with nothing around it but thorn bush and heat.

For five days in February 1984, it was full of men.

They had been taken from their homes before dawn, trucked to the airstrip, and ordered to strip. They lay naked on the hot ground under the sun. There was no food. There was no water. They were questioned, over and over, about guns.

One of them would later tell the Truth Commission that he found himself at Wagalla “naked, hungry, and thirsty, watching as life ebbed out of his father.”

Another woke up inside a pile of bodies. Next to him was his cousin, sixteen years old, shot in the back of the head.

The government said fifty-seven people died.

The survivors said thousands.

For years, most of Kenya never heard about it at all.

CHAPTER ONE

The Forgotten North

North Eastern Province had always been treated differently.

It was dry, far from Nairobi, and mostly Somali. After independence, some there had fought to join Somalia in what the government called the *shifta* war. The North East spent decades under emergency laws. In **1965**, one family alone lost two hundred camels in a single army operation.

Collective punishment had been used there before.

In **November 1980**, the region's Provincial Commissioner, **Benson Kaaria**, was reported in *The Standard* warning that Somali-speaking people would be dealt with unless they exposed the *shifta* killers among them.

By **1983**, clan fighting and banditry around Wajir had become a crisis. The government decided to act.

CHAPTER TWO

The Meeting

DISTRICT COMMISSIONER'S OFFICE, WAJIR. 8 FEBRUARY 1984.

On the orders of the National Security Council, the Wajir District Security Committee and the Provincial Security Committee met. Around the table sat senior officials from the Office of the President, the military, the provincial administration and the police. Provincial Commissioner Benson Kaaria was among them.

Their resolution, as later documented, was to “carry out an operation to disarm the Degodia and force them to provide the names of the bandits.”

The **Degodia** were one Somali clan. The operation would target every Degodia male aged twelve and above.

CHAPTER THREE

Four O'Clock

WAJIR DISTRICT. 10 FEBRUARY 1984. 0400 HOURS.

Before dawn, the police, the Administration Police and the Army moved out together.

They swept through the settlements around Wajir: Elben, Dambas, Butelehu, Eldas, Griftu, Bulla Jogoo, Tarbaj, Leheley, Wajir-Bor, Khorof Harar.

According to later accounts, soldiers burst into homes. Women were raped. Property was destroyed. The men and boys were taken.

From Bulla Jogoo alone, **381** males were removed and driven to the airstrip.

One man had only arrived in the area the day before. He was picked up that night too.

CHAPTER FOUR

Five Days

WAGALLA AIRSTRIP. 10–14 FEBRUARY 1984.

At the airstrip, the men were ordered to take off their clothes and lie on the ground. Those who refused were shot.

Then they were left in the sun.

For five days, they were kept there with no food or water. Survivors described being beaten and tortured and asked, over and over, whether they owned a gun and where it was.

Men who tried to pray were shot. According to accounts gathered afterwards, up to thirty members of one sub-clan were doused in petrol and burned alive. At night, survivors said, armed gangs were let in to carry out revenge attacks.

Men died of thirst. Men died of the heat. Men died of their wounds.

On the fifth day, the detainees broke through the barbed wire.

Hundreds were shot as they ran. Many were shot in the back.

One survivor escaped naked in the stampede. Out in the bush, a young girl herding goats found him. She gave him her scarf to cover himself.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Lorries

When it was over, the dead had to be dealt with.

According to accounts of what happened next, the dead and the wounded were piled into lorries and dumped in the bush far from the airstrip. Some bodies, survivors and investigators said, were disposed of with fire and acid.

People who had been ferried out and abandoned, some of them still alive, were scattered across Wajir district.

And a handful of people went looking for them.

CHAPTER SIX

The Heroine of Wagalla

Annalena Tonelli was an Italian Catholic volunteer. She had lived in Wajir for fifteen years and ran a tuberculosis rehabilitation centre there.

When the security forces wouldn't let her near the airstrip, she went into the bush instead.

"She organised a search party into the bush collecting the injured and the dead and ferrying them to her centre," a survivor, **Ahmed Boya Arale**, would remember.

Working with her was a nursing officer, **Mohamed Ibrahim Elmi**, who would one day become an MP and a minister. A businessman, **Noor Abdille**, helped too. Between them, they saved many of the people who had been dumped and left to die.

Tonelli treated the living at her centre. She buried the dead in a mass grave on its grounds.

The government declared her *persona non grata* and refused to renew her work permit. She was forced out of Kenya.

She took her work to Somalia. She was honoured with the UN refugee agency's Nansen Refugee Award for it. In **October 2003**, gunmen shot her dead at her TB centre in **Borama**.

Survivors in Wajir still call her the heroine of Wagalla.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Fifty-Seven

PARLIAMENT, NAIROBI. 21 MARCH 1984.

A Member of Parliament from Wajir, **Ahmed Khalif**, stood up in the House.

Hundreds had been killed at Wagalla, he said. More than three hundred had been executed immediately. More than six hundred were missing.

Senior figures in the government pushed back hard against his accusations.

28 March 1984. Khalif came back with a list of victims and photographs, and tabled them in Parliament.

12 April 1984. The government gave its answer. Minister **Justus Ole Tipis** told the House that twenty-nine people had died in a “scuffle” at the airstrip, and twenty-eight more during the wider operation.

Fifty-seven, the government said. All of them, in the official telling, unfortunate casualties of a legitimate security operation.

The survivors had a very different count. They spoke of about five thousand men taken, and thousands dead. Later reporting cited a UN figure of three thousand. A historian who studied the

massacre wrote simply that “several hundred Degodia lay dead: whether 500 died, or 1000, or more is unknown.”

In **1992**, President Moi promised compensation.
It never came.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Three Hundred and Eighty

OCTOBER 2000.

Sixteen years after the massacre, the government finally revised its figure. The official death toll went from 57 to **380**.

It was the first time the state had admitted that something far worse than a “scuffle” had happened at Wagalla.

Nobody was charged.

CHAPTER NINE

The Commission

In 2008, after the post-election violence, Kenya set up the **Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission** to look at the country's buried history, and Wagalla was near the top of its list.

The commission itself was dogged by controversy. Its chairman faced accusations of bias, and one of its international commissioners resigned in protest.

It heard from survivors. It heard from officials. The officials, according to one account of the hearings, accepted no liability. Their standard defence was: "I do not remember."

When its report came out in **2013**, it confirmed that a mass slaughter had taken place at Wagalla, and that the death toll was far higher than the state had ever admitted. It described the massacre as the worst human rights violation in Kenya's history.

It recommended an official apology and reparations for the victims, and action against those responsible, including bans from public office.

Parliament never adopted the report. When it was published in the Kenya Gazette, the volumes on massacres and killings were left out.

CHAPTER TEN

The Apology

14 February 2014. A memorial was opened at Wajir.

26 March 2015. President **Uhuru Kenyatta** issued a public apology for past wrongs committed by the state.

A **Restorative Justice Fund** of ten billion shillings was announced. Only 3.6 billion was set aside in the budget. The guidelines for claiming from it didn't come until 2018, and years later many of the people it was meant for said they had never heard of them.

Benson Kaaria, the Provincial Commissioner who sat in the meeting that ordered the operation, lived into his nineties. He defended the operation to the end. He died aged 91.

Nobody was ever prosecuted for Wagalla.

Epilogue

The airstrip is still there, nine miles west of Wajir.

On most days, it's just flat ground, thorn bush and heat. It doesn't look like the site of the worst atrocity in Kenya's modern history.

But people in Wajir remember. They remember the lorries and the bodies in the bush. They remember the Italian woman who came looking for survivors when the state would not.

And they remember the girl with the goats, who saw a naked, terrified man come out of the bush on the fifth day and gave him her scarf.

In a week when the state stripped those men of everything, it was a child who covered one of them.

THE RECORD

PLACE	Wagalla airstrip, 9 miles west of Wajir
DATES	10–14 February 1984
TARGETED	Degodia men and boys aged 12 and above
HELD	Naked, without food or water, for five days
OFFICIAL TOLL	57 (1984); revised to 380 (2000)
SURVIVORS' ESTIMATE	Thousands
TJRC (2013)	Mass slaughter confirmed; apology and reparations recommended
STATE APOLOGY	26 March 2015
PROSECUTIONS	None

Five days in the sun. Forty years without justice.

A Note from the Author

If this story stayed with you, you can buy me a coffee. It keeps the research going and helps bring the next one to you.

LIPA NA M-PESA

PAYBILL	522533
ACCOUNT	8129965
CLICK MTAA TECHNOLOGIES	

Asante sana.

— *Graham Kasindo*