

Unsung heroes

Calling the youth to peaceful action

DANIEL JUMA OMONDI believes that peace comes about when people unite to solve a social problem; that it is the result of conscious action and nurturing. He spoke to **JOE OMBUOR**.

Walking up the banks of the Nairobi River from Race Course Road bridge is a picturesque experience, complete with concrete pavements. Verdant trees filter out city pollution. The water is cleaner and less smelly.

Who gets credit for this? Most Kenyans will place their bet on the late Environment Minister John Michuki, known for his bulldozer approach to whatever he believed was right.

True, Michuki used his heavy hand and iron determination to transform part of the river from the eyesore that it was. But his was the latter bit, coming after one Daniel Juma Omondi and his army of fellow young volunteers had blazed the trail in early 2008. They cleared the primary muck at a time when the river from which the Kenyan capital draws its name was but sludge, flowing acridly to poison populations downstream.

Juma, who is now the country director of the Kenyan chapter of the Global Peace Foundation, says more than 500 young people from schools, colleges and universities participated in the initial clean up as a symbol of solidarity after the 2007/2008 post-election violence.

The clean up preceded an International Young Leaders' Summit at Gigiri in Nairobi, attended by Martin Luther King III, son of the celebrated American civil rights leader, Martin Luther King Jr.

"King was part of the young crowd that descended on Nairobi River during the summit for a subsequent cleanup," adds Juma.

He explains that the clean up at that stage was symbolic, not surgical.

"Ours was a social activity meant to have young people work together as a gesture

of unity. Studies have shown that peace is the end result when people come together to solve a social problem. We thank God that Michuki adopted this initiative as it brought in the much needed government goodwill and attracted partners such as UNEP, leading to the more detailed cleaning of the river.

A passionate crusader for peace, Juma says he owes it all to his relationship with South Korea, where he worked before he was hired as a trade development officer with the Korea Trade and Investment Promotion Agency (Kotra) in Nairobi. At the Korea Business Centre, where he worked as an assistant manager, he helped to organise Korean economic diplomacy in the East African region.

Jokingly, he says of himself: "I was made in Kenya but assembled in Korea.

"I was particularly fascinated by what the Koreans called the 'New Village Movement', which was initiated to inspire progress in rural communities. This spirit, which is the force behind their phenomenal development, is

“The young crowd at the filthy river knew no tribe.”

known in Korean as *Saemaul Undong*, and it brings people together to solve social problems."

"Though symbolic, I realised that *Saemaul Undong* had multiple positive effects on character, with remarkable impacts on education, respect, cleanliness and dignity. I thought the novel practice of community organising could help Kenya to achieve Vision 2030. This is what we are trying to achieve through the All Lights Village in Kenya, whose aim is to inspire community-driven development."

Volunteering with the Youth Federation for World Peace (YFWP), Kenya Chapter, as secretary to the board gave him the right platform to put into practice some of the peace-building ideas he had gleaned in Korea.

CELEBRATION

It came as a boon for Juma and like-minded people when, in 2008, the Global Peace Festival, renamed Global Peace Foundation (GPF) arrived in Nairobi, with its programme of inter-faith services, environmental stewardship and cultural celebration.

In what he calls "a providential sequence of events for Kenya", the United Nations Habitat World headquarters in Nairobi hosted the International Young Leaders Summit under the auspices of the YFWP in March 2009.

During the summit, one of the activities identified as a symbolic gesture of peace was the cleaning of the Nairobi River. The Global Peace Service Alliance (GPSA) was launched during this forum.

When GPF was registered in Kenya in October 2010, with businessman Manu Chandaria as its patron, Juma was on board as a leading and active member. A month later, in November, Kenya was



MAIN: Peace crusader Daniel Juma Omondi. TOP: The Nairobi River clean up. CENTRE: Juma with his family. ABOVE: Donating computers RIGHT: for the Leap Hub Project. (PHOTOS: JOE OMBUOR/ STANDARD AND COURTESY)

host to the Global Peace Convention attended by more than 1,000 delegates from 40 countries.

"Coming hardly two years after the post-poll chaos, the convention that incorporated the second International Young Leaders summit was an important statement that Kenya had transformed from turmoil," says Juma.

GPF founder chairman Hyun Jin Preston Moon attended the convention officially opened by President Kibaki. Juma became the country director of GPF's Kenya chapter during the Global Peace Convention in Atlanta, Georgia, last year, one year after he resigned from Kotra after eleven years of service.

He singles out the Rift Valley Peace Initiative that has brought lighting to villages and schools in the Rift Valley among GPF's achievements under his leadership.

Among the beneficiaries is Mutate Primary School in Molo, which was rebuilt with donations from Chandaria after being razed during the election-related clashes.

"You cannot draw a line

between light and peace," he says.

GPF is also involved in the Character and Creativity Initiative (CCI) that is helping change secondary school culture in Kenya.

An independent study conducted by the Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis (Kippra) in six secondary schools in Kenya and recently launched by the Cabinet Secretary for Education, Prof Jacob Kaimenyi, shows that nurturing character and creativity not only improves academic performance and culture, but also reduces social problems such as violence, bullying and substance abuse in the schools.

The report titled *Character and Creativity Initiative in Changing Secondary School Culture in Kenya* reveals that the pilot schools showed a significant improvement in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education examination for the last three years of CCI intervention," beaming Juma says.

"As the next step after CCI, GPF is set to launch Leap Hubs — entrepreneurship and leadership incubators to nurture young entrepreneurs right from secondary school. Already, computers have been donated to Moi Forces Academy, which has established the first Leap Hub.

Juma says GPF has appealed to the Ministry of Education to include character education and entrepreneurship as part of the school curriculum.

