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In corruption-riddled Kenya, the Mercedes-Benz is king

Rob Crilly in Nairobi

KENYA: It is easy to tell when President Mwai Kibaki has picked up one of his African counterparts from Nairobi's international airport. First his police outriders shut down the roads in and out of the city centre. Then comes a shiny silver Mercedes, its windows blacked out. Then comes another. And another. The last time I was held up by the presidential motorcade returning from the airport, I counted 74 Mercedes-Benzes cruising serenely past my stationary car. Then I lost count. So when human rights and corruption watchdogs revealed that the Kenyan government had spent EUR 10.5 million on top-of-the-range motors for senior officials and ministers since coming to power two years, I was faintly surprised that they hadn't spent more. There were Range Rovers, Land Rovers and every make of 4x4 you can imagine.

But then there were the Mercedes - 57 in all." Kenya is truly the home of the Wabenzi," concluded the report by **Transparency International** and the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights, referring to the Swahili term for the region's Mercedes-obsessed elite. "The E class appears to be a particularly popular status symbol." For generations of African leaders, public officials and, well, crooks, there is only one measure of success - a Mercedes in the driveway. But President Kibaki was supposed to have changed all that since coming to power at the start of 2003. He was elected on an anti-corruption ticket and had pledged to end extravagant gestures funded by the public purse, instead using the money to tackle poverty, rebuild the country's education system and so on. You don't need to count the Mercedes to know that little has changed so far.

This week, Kibaki lost his finance minister - the first person to resign amid allegations of a multimillion Euro procurement fraud. His government has been accused on an almost weekly basis of looting public coffers. Still, it could be worse.

The motorcade that kept my battered Mitsubishi locked in traffic for 45 minutes was carrying the outgoing president of Tanzania, Benjamin Mkapa, from Jomo Kenyatta Airport to State House. The Tanzanian defense minister has been embroiled in a public row this week over the mode of transport he selected for a private visit to his country residence - a military jet. "Where did I go wrong in using a military flight - is it a crime?" asked Juma Kapuya when confronted with flight logs that showed he had used a jet for his personal use. "What kind of transport did you want me to use, a bicycle?" His defense, in short, was that he had merely followed the precedent set by his predecessor.

Therein lies much of the problem. The Mercedes, the private plane or the pot-hole free road to your upcountry home are all seen as perks of the job for the minister or senior civil servant. As they hand over their hard-earned shillings in bribes, many ordinary Kenyans secretly hope they will one day be the beneficiaries of the backhanders. But more often they feel powerless to resist. Take a pal who filled me in on the mastermind behind a 1.3 million tone shipment of cocaine seized at Mombasa port. Over a beer at a party, he quietly explained that a former cabinet minister was widely believed to have been the "Mr Big" behind the deal. Keep an eye on the investigation, he said, because it is likely to go nowhere. Now whether or not his sources had got it right, or whether or not it was simply the beer talking, is irrelevant. The most worrying aspect was the matter of fact way that members of Kenya's educated middle-class accept the existence of criminal corruption.

The same attitude pervades numerous aspects of life here, particularly when the policeman demanding a bribe is drunk and waving an AK-47 rifle around your nose.

A survey released by **Transparency International** last year, found that more than a third of Kenyans had paid a bribe in the preceding 12 months, with the police being one of the most suspect organisations. The result is a healthy sense of cynicism among law-abiding wananchi

- as the mass population calls itself. Take the public response to the introduction of breathalysers just before Christmas. Sure, there may have been drivers who welcomed an attempt to cut the appalling accident rate on Kenya's roads, but plenty more wondered just how much this was going to cost law-abiding motorists and just how many police officer's children would suddenly receive brand new bikes for Christmas.

Already apocryphal tales abound, the most famous being the police officer who exhales into the AlcoBlow machine to get a positive result after the motorist under scrutiny has tested negative. Unbelievable? Well in a country where it takes at least 74 top-of-the-range Mercedes to carry two presidents no more than 20 miles, almost anything is believable.

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