

Out of Kenya

By Jamaica Kincaid
and Ellen Pail

Last month, we spent six days in Nairobi with a group of writers planning to form a Kenyan chapter of PEN. The time seemed auspicious for the venture.

In recent months, Amos Wako, Kenya's new Attorney General, lifted the ban on a major publication, the Nairobi Law Monthly, and ordered the release of several political prisoners. The news we heard at the two official meetings we were granted was equally promising: one official assured us that Kenya had "a free press"; the Minister of Culture praised the "free atmosphere" his country offered to writers.

But the Kenya we saw and heard of in dozens of meetings with authors, journalists and publishers was far from free. This was a Kenya of tapped phones, of mail that arrived already opened — a place where let-

Jamaica Kincaid and Ellen Pail, both novelists, were sent to Kenya by the Pen American Center.

ters and manuscripts had to be handed to visitors for safe passage out of the country.

In this Kenya, the Government of President Daniel arap Moi was so intolerant of dissent that, as one writer said, "You can no longer put together two sentences without opening yourself to political interpretation."

Here, manuscripts languished in drawers. Writers were afraid to show even one another their work. Honest exploration of contemporary reality was brought forward only at the peril of author, editor and publisher.

Since January, the Government has prevented the performance of five plays. At least one playwright was taken in for questioning about the meaning of what he had written. In July, the Government closed five university campuses in response to student protests against increased fees. Even our request to meet with professors at the University of Nairobi's literature department was denied by the Vice-Chancellor.

The Kenya we saw was not free for the writers Edward Oyangi and Ngotho Karituki, who were sentenced in July to seven years' imprisonment on charges of holding a seditious meeting in a Nairobi bar. They are now in solitary confinement, permit-

Don't believe
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'freedom.'

ted neither to read nor to write.

This Kenya certainly offered no "free atmosphere" to Gitobu Imanyara, publisher of the Nairobi Law Monthly. Mr. Imanyara has been arrested twice and charged with sedition. Though he is now out of detention, he is under constant Government surveillance, his passport has been confiscated, as has that of his assistant editor, Chris Mburu.

We also failed to discover the free press that Government officials had mentioned. One reporter quietly told us that his notes from a meeting with us had been confiscated. Newspaper writers said they could not trust even their colleagues. Editors spoke of phone calls from Government officials "advising" them to suppress stories.

The last day we were in Kenya, we had our own run-in with Mr. Moi's Government. Looking for a shanty-

town on the outskirts of Nairobi, we turned down a shady road and found ourselves face to face with uniformed guards, one of whom cocked his rifle.

Though we didn't know it, we were in front of President Moi's home, which is a stone's throw from the miserable slum we meant to visit. As we later verified, there is no law against driving by his house.

Nevertheless, there were the guns. We tried to explain who we were. We waved a U.S. passport. Still we were about to be taken inside and detained when, for a bribe of 300 Kenyan shillings — 10 U.S. dollars — they let us go.

The Kenya we visited was a grim and brutal place. It is a far cry from the country romanticized in such books and films as "Out of Africa," the one American tourists eagerly visit on safari, the one U.S. aid supports. After what we have witnessed, we believe that such aid should be tied to progress in human rights.

We hope to see greater press coverage to counterbalance Kenya's gauzy image. And we hope, too, that Americans will decide not to travel there until the people are as free as the animals — or, at least, until they get as much press.