

Bozize Probes LRA Incursion Reports ^[1]

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General Francois Bozize, president of the Central African Republic, has given an assurance to his Ugandan counterpart Yoweri Museveni that his administration is investigating United Nations reports that rebels of northern Uganda's Lord's Resistance Army, LRA, have entered the CAR to join up with anti-Bozize guerrillas.

Bozize's pledge was made during a two-day state visit to Uganda in late August.

However, if fighters from Joseph Kony's LRA are now fighting alongside rebels of the CAR's Popular Army for the Restoration of Democracy, APRD, it will prove difficult for the beleaguered Bozize to discharge his promise to Museveni.

While Museveni's civil war with the LRA is now 21 years old, Bozize has been trying for more than four years to curb a struggle by the APRD, operating from bases in the north of the country. The APRD protests that the Bozize government toppled the legitimate government of former president Ange Félix Patassé in a military coup in March 2003, and has since mismanaged public funds and divided the nation.

Patassé had achieved power in successive democratic elections in 1993 and 1999.

Under numerous government assaults, people in northern CAR have been forced to flee their villages to seek refuge deep in forests where conditions are dire - not enough food, little clean water, and little or no access to medical care. The Washington-based Refugees International has accused Bozize's army of carrying out punitive raids in which whole villages have been burned to the ground in areas where the APRD operates.

Bozize has, in turn, accused Sudan's government in Khartoum, for many years the main armourer of the LRA, of backing the APRD. France, which supports Bozize's administration, is actively involved in fighting the rebels.

Given the scale of the fighting, with more than 100,000 people driven from their homes, Bozize faces almost insuperable difficulties in assessing whether the LRA is operating alongside the APRD.

The United Nations Mission in Sudan, UNMIS, reported in February this year that some 400 LRA fighters were making their way from the Ugandan movement's main base, in the Garamba National Park in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, through Tambura in southwest Sudan and across the Mbokou River into CAR to join up with the APRD fighters.

A spokesman for the Ugandan army, Major Felix Kulayige, also confirmed the movement of two LRA units, one 400-strong the other comprising 40 fighters, into CAR. The Brussels-based International Crisis Group said it believed the LRA was transporting Khartoum-supplied weapons for the APRD.

The 5000 square kilometre Garamba, in the northeastern Congo, is a UNESCO World Heritage site where the LRA leader Joseph Kony and his deputy, Vincent Otti, have their guerrilla headquarters among the park's vast forests and savannahs.

Luis Moreno-Ocampo, chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, ICC, in The Hague, issued arrest warrants for Kony, Otti and three other senior LRA commanders, Okot Odiambo, Domenic Ogwen and Raska Lukwiya, who was subsequently killed in fighting with the Ugandan army.

The 23-page charge sheet alleges that they "engaged in a cycle of violence and established a pattern of brutalisation of civilians by acts including murder, abduction, sexual enslavement, mutilation, as well as mass burnings of houses and looting of camp settlements". The charge sheet further alleges that Kony and his men abducted civilians, including children, who were forcibly "recruited" as fighters, porters and sex slaves to serve the LRA.

Kony himself faces 33 different counts of crimes against humanity and war crimes.

It is unclear from the UN reports which of Kony's commanders may have led the alleged LRA unit incursion into CAR. Bozize, in a joint press conference with Museveni in Kampala on August 22, admitted that his intelligence officials had made no progress in investigating the alleged link-up between the LRA and the APRD.

"We have taken all the necessary measures and tried to verify the claims [that the LRA is operating on CAR territory]. Up to now, we have not found truth in this information," said Bozize.

Every government in the region where the Congo, CAR, Chad, Sudan and Uganda borders meet is alleged to be supporting rebel movements in one or more of their neighbours, in a bewildering cross-borders cat's cradle of subversion and military diplomacy.

CAR's military head of state, who is also the country's defence minister, denounced the LRA as agents of the Arab-dominated Sudan government which thought it could "intimidate us not to stand with our black brothers in southern Sudan".

Asked whether he would enforce the arrest warrants issued by the ICC's Moreno-Ocampo, Bozize said, "If it is found that they [any LRA leaders] are there [on CAR territory], we shall know what to do next. We cannot say anything now."

CAR is one of 104 signatories to the Rome Statute which governed the entry into operation of the fledgling ICC in 2002. The Rome Statute is an international treaty which binds signatories to detain and transport to The Hague alleged war criminals for whom arrest warrants have been issued by the ICC. Since 2002, only one alleged war criminal, Thomas Lubanga, former leader of a militia in the Congo province of Ituri, has been sent to The Hague for trial.

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