

Captured LRA Man May Face Death Penalty

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But relatives of rebel commander's alleged victims say army shouldn't have spared his life. When northern Ugandans learned of the capture of Thomas Kwoyelo, a notorious commander of the rebel Lord Resistance Army, LRA, it stirred some horrible memories.

An LRA colonel believed to be in his 40s, Kwoyelo was born in the Bira village in the Amuru district north of Gulu, which for many years was the epicentre of the rebel war.

Kwoyelo's based himself in the Kilak Hills, a well known landmark in the Amuru district, from which he is said to have led attacks throughout the region - the victims of which fled to the Pabbo internal refugee camp, the north's largest with some 60,000 residents.

The camp remains a commercial and residential centre.

Locals in the area told IWPR that Kwoyelo committed atrocities against his former neighbours until August 2006 when he and other LRA units retreated to South Sudan after the signing a ceasefire with Uganda.

Kwoyelo eventually joined rebel leader Joseph Kony in Garamba National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where he reportedly was promoted to colonel and directed LRA operations.

Kwoyelo is thought to be LRA's fourth-in-command, and last week was captured in Ukwa, DRC, after being shot during a clash with combined forces of Uganda, DRC and South Sudan.

Kwoyelo was airlifted to Kampala by the Uganda army for treatment and is recovering at a military hospital here, officials said.

Those who spoke to IWPR in Amuru district described Kwoyelo as a ruthless LRA commander who they want punished severely for the death and suffering of their relatives.

"Why did they (the joint forces) spare him?" asked Christopher Ojera, the Pabbo local council chairman.

"This man (Kwoyelo) masterminded the killings of people in Pabbo," Ojera said. "He wanted my head. Why did they bring him (back) alive?"

Ojera's feelings were shared by many others in the region.

"I am not excited about Kwoyelo's capture," Jennifer Amito said. "Why did they [spare his life]? This man was a killer who butchered our relatives.

“They should have killed him like the people he butchered in Pabbo and Acholi sub-region,” said a man who declined to give his name.

“I don’t think I will forgive him for my relatives he killed. This man committed a lot of atrocities. He deserves to be hanged.”

The capture of other top rebel commanders, such as Okot Odhiambo and Dominic Ongwen, both of whom are wanted by the International Criminal Court, ICC, along with LRA leader Joseph Kony, would have a much greater impact on the LRA, said Christopher Kinyera.

“Kwoyelo’s capture has less significance. If it was Odhiambo or Ongwen, it would disorganise the LRA leadership. Let the forces capture Kony, Odiambo or Ongwen, then we can celebrate,” he said.

Kwoyelo’s relatives, meanwhile, expressed relief that he was still alive and free of the LRA.

“His capture is good. We now feel relieved. We are no longer going to be called relatives of the rebel commander,” said Kwoyelo’s uncle, a Pabbo resident who refused to be named.

An elderly man, who claimed to be close relative of Kwoyelo, said, “The community should forgive him. He might have been possessed. There is need for reconciliation.”

Atube Omach, an Amuru district leader, said, “The [joint] operation should continue until they capture Kony and his top commanders. I am excited about the operation. It’s our wish that this war comes to an end.”

Ugandan army spokesperson Major Felix Kulayigye said that since Kwoyelo was captured in a combat situation, he would probably be tried by the military court. If he is found guilty of murder, he faces death by hanging or life imprisonment

“He will not be granted amnesty. We shall try him in a military court martial,” Kulayigye told IWPR.

Speaking to IWPR from the Ugandan army base in the DRC, Captain Deo Akiiki said Kwoyelo’s capture show that “the [joint] operation is [on the] right truck. [The] LRA can longer abduct, they can’t fight or loot. For the last one week, the LRA rebels are surviving on leaves and wild fruits”.

Henry Okello Oryem, a Uganda minister of state and former leader of the peace negotiations with the LRA, said, “This is the beginning of the end of the LRA rebellion. Kony’s days are now numbered.”

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