

Continued Pursuit of LRA Questioned

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Calls grow for halt to military campaign against Ugandan rebels.

As operation Lightning Thunder enters a second month, many are questioning the value of the military campaign waged by Uganda and its allies against the Lord's Resistance Army, LRA, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC.

Analysts warn that Ugandan, Sudanese and Congolese forces may be in for long war in DRC, and wonder whether it's winnable.

They point out that Uganda battled the LRA in northern Uganda for 20 years, but was unable to defeat the rebels or capture their leader Joseph Kony, who with his top commanders has been sought by the International Criminal Court, ICC, in The Hague for war crimes and crimes against humanity since July 2005.

Uganda was quick to say the operation would be short-lived when it launched a mid-December air strike on LRA camps in northeastern DRC.

"In a matter of weeks we will have captured Kony or he will have surrendered," Foreign Affairs Minister Sam Kuteesa told the press at the time.

Later, Uganda president Yoweri Museveni called the operation a success, saying that Kony's camps had been destroyed and his ability to wage war was diminished.

But there's little evidence to back up these claims. Though scattered, the LRA has killed as many as 500 people in the region since the attack.

Last week, a United Nations team said more than 100 women were reportedly raped in just two days in the towns of Faradje and Tadu alone.

Ndebesa Mwangushya, a history professor at Makerere University in Kampala, said the likelihood of Uganda finding or defeating Kony is slim.

"The Ugandan army is fighting a highly mobile group, which [knows] the jungle, and this plays to the rebels' advantage," said Mwangushya. "Unless Ugandan troops have highly sophisticated equipment, the war will be a long [and] fruitless one."

Questions have been asked whether the operation was poorly planned and ill-timed, or badly executed.

Recent reports indicate that bad weather hampered the launch of the attack, which was initially set for 7.30 am on December 14, but was delayed by four hours.

Warning of the attack apparently leaked to the LRA, giving Kony, his top commanders and many of his fighters, time to escape.

Museveni said that radio monitoring devices were found at Kony's camp, and recent statements from survivors of the attack confirm that Kony fled before it was launched.

Mwangushya notes that the Uganda government has little support in the north where Kony has a network of allies.

"Kony has informers, and the military is no exception," said Mwangushya. "We can't rule that out."

Supporters of the operation claim that Kony was flushed from his base in the DRC's Garamba National Park - where he had been based for past three years - and therefore it can be called a success.

Indeed, it seems, Uganda may commit more troops into the operation.

Army chief General Aronda Nyakairima recently said the LRA was on the run and more soldiers were needed to finish them off. That claim has been questioned, since most reports indicate the LRA has split into small units operating in different locales.

Meanwhile, support for the war is faltering in the Ugandan parliament.

"The army should accept the operation is not succeeding, instead of wasting national resources," said Professor Morris Ogenga Latigo, leader of opposition in parliament, who is from northern Uganda, and a member of the Acholi ethnic group.

"This operation was not strategically justified," Latigo continued. "It failed to decisively to take [out] the LRA leadership."

"Any military success is accompanied by evidence. But what we are seeing in this war is the military saying we have discovered graves and guns."

He asked why the military was not allowing independent confirmation of the operation, "No journalist is yet to be allowed to see this, which adds to the argument that this is one of the most botched operations this government has ever done."

As Uganda plans to send more troops to DRC, people of northern Uganda, which was where Kony committed most of his crimes, worry of an LRA return.

“People in my district in Kitgum, especially [areas] that border Sudan, have been moving back to camps,” said member of parliament Beatrice Anywar.

As controversy around the operation continues, calls are increasing for a ceasefire and reassessment.

“The ceasefire is the only reasonable thing to do now,” Latigo said. “This would give government a chance to review their military plans which have not produced any tangible results so far.

“It would give a chance to again try and engage the LRA peacefully.”

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