

Curtains for Kony

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All dramas have to end. People demand that they do. That could not be more true than with the story of Joseph Kony and his Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda.

It is time for the fin de la comedie. Only this has not been a comedy, but an endless tragedy.

For those just tuning in, the latest in this unfolding and all-too-true saga is that the rebel leader, Joseph Kony, has reportedly killed yet another of his top commanders.

This time it is Okot Odhiambo, along with eight of his comrades. They were apparently incensed that the mercurial Kony, who claims to be a prophet and spirit medium, was balking at signing a peace deal with the Ugandan government after nearly two years of talks.

If confirmed, this means that of the original five commanders of the Lord's Resistance Army, LRA, who have been indicted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes and crimes against humanity, only two remain. They are Kony himself and his deputy Dominic Ongwen.

Ongwen has been lucky. He was reportedly killed more than two years ago by the unusually efficient Arrow Boys, a virulent militia of the Teso region of eastern Uganda that mobilised after the LRA invaded that part of the country in 2004.

It was a case of mistaken identity, obviously, because Ongwen is alive.

Regardless, the work of the ICC has just got easier. Instead of five criminals to worry about, they only have two. Who knows how many will be around in another six months?

With Odhiambo's reported death, the nearly two million people in northern Uganda who have been living in internal refugee camps, might be able to breathe a little easier. He was said to be one of the LRA's most ruthless commanders.

The reported death of Odhiambo, which was the subject of high-level meetings on April 13 between Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni and his top advisors, is the latest episode in what appears to be the slow but steady unravelling of the LRA.

Last October, Kony reportedly had his long-time deputy Vincent Otti killed, apparently because he crossed the LRA leader and was held to be disloyal.

But I suspect it was because Otti had been the prime mover behind the LRA's engagement in the extensive peace negotiations. At one point, even before the peace talks had officially begun, Otti told me personally that he wanted peace simply so that he could "go home".

Apparently that sentiment has spread throughout the LRA ranks.

But Kony has stalled, and on April 10 failed to show up for an event on the jungle borders of South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo where some 200 people, including leaders of the Acholi people in northern Uganda, had gathered for the finale to the talks – a formal signing of the peace agreement.

So what now?

The LRA is clearly decimating itself, and by process of elimination, may soon not exist at all.

The Ugandan delegation has decamped from the peace talks in Juba, South Sudan, out of frustration – shared with others – at nearly two years of so-called negotiations with a rebel leader who is evidently not interested in a deal.

And finally, discussions about how justice should be dispensed for the remaining LRA leaders accused of being war criminals could soon be moot.

The departure of the Ugandan contingent does not, however, spell the end of the story.

Museveni is supposed to meet as soon as April 10 with Salva Kiir, the president of South Sudan. They'll be talking about what to do with Kony.

Key to these discussions will be South Sudan's second-in-command, Riek Machar, who has been the official mediator of the peace talks going back to early 2006, when he and a handful of peace advocates met secretly with Kony in the jungle.

Those meetings formed the foundations for the talks, which finally culminated in the peace deal that still remains unsigned.

In those meetings, which were filmed and leaked to the press, Machar was quite blunt. He told Kony that if he did not agree to peace, there would be war.

It is not a prospect that Kony would want. The Ugandan army has been in South Sudan since 2002, when it first launched Operation Iron Fist and attacked Kony's long-time bases there, and eventually drove him into the Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC.

If South Sudan's army joined the fray, it would be too much for Kony's disintegrating army. That could be why Kony has reportedly made moves to relocate his forces to the Central African Republic.

Time is running out for Kony. He has used and abused the goodwill and extensive financial support of the

international community. He has taken advantage of the goodwill and wishes of leaders of the Acholi community in northern Uganda.

And he has taxed the patience of the massive apparatus that has been constructed around these talks for the very purpose of achieving a lasting peace for millions of people in northern Uganda.

This is not the first time that Kony has refused to sign a peace deal. Maybe it will be the last.

The world has been watching closely this time. The United Nations and major global powers have been involved. By walking away from a peace deal, and by removing his latest top negotiator, Kony has once again snubbed the international community.

That was not a good move, because more than one powerful country has said it will support a violent end to this drama if peace is not achieved.

For those who have watched these events unfold, it is all too obvious that the time is rapidly approaching for the final curtain to fall.

Responsibility for bringing the drama to a close may rest with Uganda, which, for some 22 years now, has been unable or unwilling to write the final scene. Maybe that will change now.

Uganda apparently has an agreement with the DRC to launch military action against Kony in his hideout in the Garamba National Park.

A senior Ugandan official said on April 13 that his government was planning “something”, which could be a reference to the much-flagged attack on Kony’s base. With international support, it might happen.

Stay tuned.

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