

Doubts Raised Over LRA Peace Tour

Sincerity of LRA delegation seeking forgiveness in the north questioned. The credibility of a reconciliation tour of northern Uganda by a delegation of the Lord's Resistance Army, LRA, has been challenged by victims and an ex-rebel official.

Despite the team's dozens of meetings with hundreds of victims of LRA violence, Captain Ray Apire, a former spiritual advisor to Kony, known as "the bishop", said Kony seems uninterested in a peace deal.

"Kony is not reconciling with anybody," Apire told IWPR. This was made apparent by the widely reported internal power struggle that has left his second-in-command, Vincent Otti, dead, he said.

On November 22, state-owned newspaper New Vision reported that three recent LRA defectors had confirmed that Kony executed Otti by firing squad in early October. Stories of Otti's death first surfaced nearly a month ago and he has been unheard of since.

Kony has denied that Otti is dead, saying he is only under house arrest.

"Kony is still interested in war," insisted Apire. "If Kony was...talking peace, he would not kill Otti. Why would they fight for power, if they are...dissolving the LRA group and resolving the conflict through talks?"

He said that while the disintegration of the LRA was a sign of the army's possible demise, it also shows that Kony intends to keep control of his militia.

Apire escaped from the LRA in June 2004, saying that the army has lost its purpose, and has been living in Gulu. He questioned the LRA delegation's links to Kony.

"When asked about Otti, they kept saying he was sick, denying that Otti was arrested," Apire said of the LRA team. "Kony later contradicted them by saying Otti was under house arrest. This means the team is not coordinating with Kony in the bush, because they don't know some of the facts.

Apire is not the only one dismayed by the LRA delegation's tour, a series of orchestrated events in which victims are asked publicly if they have forgiven Kony, with most saying they have.

The tour is part of the LRA's efforts to consult people in the north of the country on reconciliation and accountability elements of their peace deal with the government.

But war victims in Gulu contacted by IWPR said they were unable to speak out because the LRA team dictated what kind of questions were asked and limited the number of people who could talk at each gathering.

Uganda's presidential advisor on northern Uganda affairs, Richard To-dwong, who has been traveling with the team, said he didn't like the way victims were treated.

"People are asking: why did you hurt us if you were fighting a just war as you claim?" he said. "These questions should be answered because at the end of the day, total reconciliation comes from the victims."

Michael Okello 32, of Koch Goma internal refugee camp, complained that rebel team leader Martin Ojul chose a very disparaging way of asking for forgiveness from victims. It seemed as if Ojul was making them apologise, he said.

"This is adding insult to injury. Does it mean that these people came all their way to tell us to rise up our hands so that they take our pictures and show the world?" he asked. "Are they after genuine reconciliation?"

"They want us to reconcile but they haven't accounted for the atrocities they committed."

To many, Ojul was not offering an apology on behalf of the LRA. Rather he was trying to create an impression that the Acholi community has forgiven Kony and is opposed to a trial for Kony and his top commanders in front of the International Criminal Court, ICC, in The Hague.

However, chances of the warrants being dropped are low.

ICC deputy prosecutor Fatou Bensouda said this week that warrants are still outstanding for Kony and three LRA commanders and that the court expects member states, such as Uganda, to arrest them.

She said that even though continuing conflicts present obstacles to the arrest of suspects, the interests of peace and justice demand that states take assertive action.

"Arresting criminals in the context of ongoing conflicts is a difficult endeavour," she said. "Individuals sought by the court often enjoy the protection of armies or militias."

The choice of the LRA team to visit home areas of its members also sparked questions about the fairness of consultation mission.

Four out of six members of the LRA delegation, including Ojul, Michael Anywar, Peter Ongom and Joel Obita, visited their own villages as part of the tour, rather than places where rebels attacked civilians.

These people should have gone to Atiak where they killed people in their hundreds, and Omot in Pader, where they killed over 20, insisted Kenneth Nyero of Gulu.

"Such are the places where they truly need to ask for forgiveness," he said.

Atiak is Otti's home village, and he reportedly ordered the attack there in 1995.

Though the regions of northern Uganda bore the brunt of the LRA war, the West Nile area in northwestern Uganda also suffered.

It too was visited by the team, and war victims demanded compensation, post war reconstruction, and also called for the LRA leaders to be punished under Ugandan law, if possible.

The LRA are reported to have staged bloody ambushes on West Nile-bound cargo and passenger vehicles on the Karuma-Pakwach highway, the major route to West Nile. Hundreds of people were either killed or abducted and vast quantities of goods were looted.

Arua district councilor Christine Aciferu asked that Kony return all abducted children and women from West Nile. "It is only fair that we get these children back," said a tearful Aciferu.

"Our region failed to grow because of the ambushes which simply instilled fear and tortured our people," said Luiji Candini, Arua secretary for security.

Once the LRA team's tour is finished, it is expected to return to the Sudan-Congo border and deliver the results to Kony. That will likely be followed by a very public event in which several hundred people from northern Uganda will meet Kony to discuss the peace deal between the rebels and the government.

Back in Gulu, Apire said that while he was doubtful that peace would be accomplished, he nonetheless predicted Kony's demise.

"Kony told us several times from the bush that he is like Moses, who will not reach the Promised Land," said Apire, suggesting that Kony would die before his army achieved victory.

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