

Garang Loss a Blow for Uganda Peace Hopes?

Author: [Fawzia Sheikh](#)

There's concern that John Garang's death will set back peace prospects in northern Uganda.

The death in August of John Garang, the new Sudanese vice-president and former leader of the Sudan People's Liberation Army, SPLA, was a shock to his country, but the tragedy is also being felt farther afield, notably in Uganda.

For almost 20 years, Uganda has seen the insurgent Lord's Resistance Army, LRA, use Sudan as a base to wage war against President Yoweri Museveni's government – and now there's concern that Garang's death could damage peace prospects here.

“Indeed, their latest attack on Kit Valley in southern Sudan, less than a week after Garang's burial, was aimed at sending a message that they are still active and capable,” said Paul Nantulya, head of political engagement, Africa and transitional justice, at the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation in Cape Town, South Africa. The LRA killed 17 people in the latest incident.

The Ugandan rebel group led by Joseph Kony aims to replace Museveni's leadership with a political regime based on the Ten Commandments, but ironically has been committed to a violent agenda of murder, kidnap, and maiming against the Acholi tribe in both northern Uganda and southern Sudan.

“Children are either being abducted or killed and raped by the LRA in northern Uganda,” said the UN Children's Fund representative in Kampala, Martin Mugwanja. The LRA has targeted children throughout the 19-year war, forcibly recruiting boys to fight and forcing girls to become sex slaves for its commanders. Relief agencies estimate that more than 20,000 children have been abducted across northern Uganda. Children are often inducted into the LRA by being forced to kill other children.

The leaders of both Uganda and Sudan historically supported one another's rebel movements. For many years, the Sudanese government in Khartoum used the LRA as “a first line of defence” against SPLA positions in the south, said Nantulya. The impending disengagement between the SPLA and the Sudan Armed Forces, coupled with a joint operation between the SPLA and the Ugandan army, had weakened the LRA militarily.

For now, the new SPLA leadership will likely devote a lot of time to reorganising itself and pushing forward with the peace agreement, which compels it to contain and expel all armed groups including foreign forces. “As we talk, these processes are behind schedule, and Dr Garang's death is likely to cause further delays,” said Nantulya.

The SPLA has a sizeable presence in the Nuba Mountains and Southern Blue Nile province. Nantulya said that until its redeployment is complete, the SPLA's strength in the south will be too ineffective to counter the LRA, giving the Ugandan rebels room to manoeuvre.

As it stands, the LRA may see Garang's death as the source of a potential rift between Uganda and Sudan. “The SPLA may think Uganda had something to do with it,” said Yasin Olum, a lecturer in the department of political science at Makerere University in Kampala. “There's still a little bit of doubt between Sudan and Uganda.”

Speculation has raged in the Ugandan press that Garang's death in a Ugandan helicopter crash could have

been sabotage or negligence on the part of the Kampala government by allowing Garang to return home to southern Sudan from a meeting in the Ugandan capital, late in the day and with bad weather looming over the mountains of Sudan. Even Museveni initially raised concerns his childhood friend Garang may have been deliberately targeted.

“Garang’s death impacts the peace process in northern Uganda because he was a strong advocate for a comprehensive solution for the north,” said John Prendergast, International Crisis Group specialist on African affairs in Washington, DC. He said that although it will take a while, Garang’s successor, Salva Kiir, will become an equally strong supporter of demobilising the LRA.

“John Garang issued an ultimatum that come November, the LRA would face military action if they failed to disband,” said Nantulya. Museveni and Garang had drawn up a number of joint plans for northern Uganda, and the imminent visit of Kiir to Kampala is likely to centre on those policies.

Others are worried by the tragic change in the leadership of the SPLA. “When people die, they go away with their visions,” said Robert Opio, national advocacy coordinator of Civil Society Organisations for Peace in northern Uganda, a non-governmental organisation based in Kampala.

Opio said he believed Kiir is not as committed as Garang about ending northern Uganda’s conflict and is unsure he will become a proponent of all that the late vice-president advocated - at least not immediately.

“He’s still trying to clean his house before he starts helping others sweep theirs,” said Opio, referring to Kiir’s likely commitment first to consolidating relationships between the SPLA and the Sudanese government. “That sometimes happens in leadership.”

At the same time, the political will of both the Ugandan and Sudanese governments also affects the dynamics of a peaceful resolution in northern Uganda. Opio said that although Sudan has allowed Uganda to use its territory to hunt LRA rebels, the Ugandan army still seems helpless to prevent the LRA’s continued abductions and killings in the north of the country.

Moreover, he said, Sudan sometimes denies access to mediators who wish to discuss peace with Joseph Kony.

The International Criminal Court in the Dutch capital, The Hague, this year began to put pressure on the LRA by threatening to issue arrest warrants for the group’s top brass. This struck fear into some former members who were concerned they would not receive the Ugandan government’s promise of amnesty.

Now, it seems, the pressure is off the LRA, said Opio, and “Kony gets some time to breathe”.

Fawzia Sheikh is a regular IWPR contributor.

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