

LRA Chief Confirms Deputy's Death

Author: [Samuel Okiror](#)

Ugandan rebel chief Joseph Kony also carries out a major reshuffle of his peace negotiators. The leader of the Ugandan rebel movement, the Lord's Resistance Army, has confirmed that his second-in-command Vincent Otti is dead and announced a purge of his negotiating team at peace talks intended to end two decades of war.

The vice-president of South Sudan, Riek Machar, confirmed Otti's death following a conversation he had with Lord's Resistance Army, LRA, leader Joseph Kony on January 23.

"I was officially informed by Joseph Kony that Vincent Otti is dead," Machar told reporters in Juba, the capital of the semi-autonomous region of South Sudan.

Machar has played a key mediating role in the talks between the Ugandan government and the LRA since he oversaw the opening of negotiations in mid-2006.

Otti was regarded as the main force within the LRA behind the current peace process. It has been widely reported that he was killed by Kony in October.

This week, Kony also announced the removal of his top peace negotiator Martin Ojul along with two others, after accusing them of profiting from the peace talks.

Ojul was considered by some to be an ally of Otti.

Kony appointed David Nyekorach Matsanga, a Ugandan who formerly served as London-based advisor to Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe, as his new lead negotiator. Matsanga also worked under the late Ugandan president Milton Obote as his national youth chairman.

The LRA chief promoted an existing team member, James Obita, to the second-top slot under Matsanga.

Besides Ojul, who had led the LRA delegation for 18 months, Nairobi-based LRA spokesman Godfrey Ayoo and team member Otim Okullu were removed.

The personnel changes were announced during a phone interview which Matsanga gave to the Gulu-based radio station Mega FM on the evening of January 22.

"I got a phone call from the LRA leader Joseph Kony this afternoon announcing the reshuffles in the LRA negotiating team in Juba," Matsanga said in remarks broadcast by the radio.

“With effect from 5:30 pm today, Martin Ojul is no longer the head of LRA delegation. Godfrey Ayoo and Otim Okullu have been dismissed.

“The changes have been brought because Ojul and other people had [attempted] to defeat the peace process. He was not willing to push these peace talks further.”

Matsanga, who said Machar had been informed of the delegation changes, said Kony intended to appoint more people from the Uganda diaspora to bring the team’s total up to 16 members.

Efforts by IWPR to contact Ojul, who was reportedly in Juba, were unsuccessful.

Speaking to Mega FM radio, Kony would not discuss the manner of Otti’s death, saying only that his former deputy’s demise would not derail the peace process.

“The matters surrounding the fate of Otti entirely remain our internal matter. It is not a concern of anybody or the government,” said Kony.

“Do you people ever ask President Museveni over decisions he makes regarding indiscipline [among] UPDF army officers?”

Over the course of this 20-minute radio interview on January 22, Kony accused Ugandan leader Yoweri Museveni of attempting to undermine the Juba peace talks.

“People should know that it is the government who wants to derail the peace process,” said Kony. “Museveni recently signed an agreement with DRC [Democratic Republic of Congo], MONUC [UN mission in DRC], and Rwanda to flush us out of Garamba.”

The LRA’s forces are currently headquartered in the Garamba national park, in the northeast of DRC.

The Ugandan government has given Kony until January 31 to sign a deal or risk being attacked by the DRC’s army, backed by United Nations peacekeepers based in that country.

Critics of the proposed attack, which was agreed upon by President Museveni and his DRC counterpart Joseph Kabila, fear that it could undermine the peace talks and possibly lead to a resumption of war in northern Uganda.

Kony insisted that he did not want renewed conflict.

“People should know that the LRA will not start another war against the government,” he said. “I am only waiting to sign the final peace agreement, if the peace talks are concluded successfully.

“I will never send any of my commanders to break any agreement signed between us and [the South Sudan] government in Juba.”

Kony underscored his desire to end the war and return home to in northern Uganda.

“I am eagerly waiting to sign a peace agreement,” he said. “I want to sign a peace agreement so that I return back to my home village in Odek.”

At the same time, he warned, “If a comprehensive peace agreement is not signed, I will not come out of the bush.”

Some observers view Kony’s remarks as an attempt to portray Museveni as the spoiler in the peace process, despite the fact that the LRA has been fighting for the last 20 years.

“He is a clever man. He wants to confuse the public that he is more interested in the peace talks. We shall wait to see his commitment to the peace process,” a Ugandan government official told IWPR on condition of anonymity.

The LRA insurgency has left more than 1.8 million people displaced, an estimated 100,000 dead, and nearly 40,000 people abducted, many of them children.

In October 2005, the Hague-based International Criminal Court, issued arrest warrants against Kony and his top commanders for war crimes and crimes against humanity. The charges include murder, rape, sexual enslavement, mutilation and the recruitment of child soldiers.

This week, the Ugandan government was quick to say that the changes to the LRA team will not stall the talks, which are expected to resume in Juba on January 28.

“The sackings and dismissal of some members of LRA delegation by Kony is an internal matter,” said Ugandan interior minister Ruhakana Rugunda, who heads his government’s negotiating team.

“As far as we are concerned, it will not affect the peace talks. As a government, we are ready to meet with any authorised members of LRA delegation for the conclusion of the peace talks in Juba.”

Rugunda denied rumours that President Museveni may have given money to some of the LRA negotiators, prompting their dismissals by Kony.

“I have no information to that effect,” said Rugundu.

Machar, meanwhile, said he was confident a peace deal would be reached soon, although he did not say when that might happen.

He noted that the sides have yet to come to terms on how a prospective peace deal would be implemented, as well as on measures to disarm and demobilise the LRA guerrillas and reintegrate them into civilian life.

Apart from these matters, he said, any other outstanding issues are “technical and can be resolved in a short while”.

Matsanga said the LRA delegation will return to Juba this week so the talks can resume on January 28.

“We shall work together to achieve lasting peace in northern Uganda,” he said.

Samuel Okiror Egadu is an IWPR contributor in northern Uganda.

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