

LRA's Foes Chafe at Peace Delay

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Embittered by years of war, former pro-government paramilitaries want Ugandan rebels captured if peace deal is not signed.

Former members of pro-government militias in northern Uganda have called for Lord's Resistance Army leader Joseph Kony should be hunted down if he fails to sign a peace agreement in the coming weeks.

Former soldiers of the now demobilised Amuka, or "Rhino", militia of northern Uganda, which fought the rebel movement alongside the regular army, told IWPR that Kony must sign the final accord if he is serious about peace.

If he fails to sign, militia members say they want to take action against him.

"If Joseph Kony does not behave maturely this time, we shall go back to combat to fight him seriously," said Jonathan Okwir, a former Amuka paramilitary.

Okwir, who lives about 40 kilometres east of Lira, said that after 20 years of fighting against the Lord's Resistance Army, LRA, he believed the rebels could only be stopped if Kony and his lieutenants were pursued and confronted wherever they were hiding, he said.

"I am determined to follow [Kony], together with Ugandan government forces, [to] his hideouts in the forests of [Democratic Republic of] Congo, where they say he is with his followers," he said.

The Amuka militia emerged when northern Ugandan leaders demanded an auxiliary force composed of local fighters who were familiar with the territory and who could operate in tandem with the Ugandan arm to combat the LRA effectively.

The militia's primary mission, however, was to guard the refugee camps filled with people displaced by insurgent raiding. These camps themselves became soft targets for the rebels.

More than 7,000 Amuka members were recruited in the north, although some say they were poorly equipped and trained.

The Amuka were recently demobilised by the government, with some absorbed into the regular military and others sent for further training and then integration into the police force.

Many others were given demobilisation packages to help them reintegrate into civilian life.

After years of difficult fighting against rebel forces, many of the former militia fighters say they are frustrated by the seemingly endless delays in the peace talks, which have been going on since July 2006.

The date for a final deal to be signed by the government and the LRA has now been postponed until April 15 in Juba, South Sudan, where the talks have been taking place. Political and religious leaders from Uganda are in Juba to witness the signing.

Many ex-militia members, however, insist that only the arrest and trial of Kony will bring peace to northern Uganda.

"I was among the local militia when the rebels attacked our positions at Barlonyo in 2004," recalled on former Amuka man, Mark Opila. "The rebels attacked the camp late evening. They overpowered us and we had to retreat."

During the attack he described, a large force of rebels overran a refugee camp and slaughtered an estimated 300 civilians. According to survivors, the rebels ordered camp residents into their thatch huts, which they set on fire, killing those who tried to flee - in many case hacking them to death with machetes.

Opila lost an eye in the fighting.

He argues that if Kony refuses to honour the Juba peace process by not signing the deal, he deserves to be hunted down.

"He has not fought against the Ugandan government, but civilians," Opila said. "If the rebel leader fails [to sign] - God forbid - I have to return to the army barracks to prepare to fight him."

Another former combatant, Andrew Ogwang, who lost a leg while fighting Kony in Lira district, said the rebel leader understands only two things - military confrontation and the 2005 arrest warrants issued for him and his top commanders by the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

"I encourage my fellow former combatants to prepare to go back and join hands together with the [Ugandan army] to root them out," said Ogwang, who lost his wife during the conflict.

"Why should only one person fool the whole world?" he asked, casting doubt over Kony's sincerity.

John Awira, formerly with the Amuka force, believes the LRA chief has been using the 20 months of peace negotiations to regroup his forces.

"[Kony] is aware of what his forces did in the north," said Awira said. "He is not a peacemaker. If he is a peacemaker, why does he kill his very close long-time friends like Vincent Otti," he asked.

Otti was the deputy commander of the LRA, but was reportedly killed by Kony last October on grounds of disloyalty.

Awira said that if Kony signs the peace deal, it will only be because he thinks the Ugandan authorities might protect him from arrest and trial by the ICC. Uganda has agreed to ask the ICC to drop the charges, and instead to set up a special domestic court to try rebel leaders - but only if Kony signs the agreement.

In Awira's view, the Ugandan military should detain Kony and bring him to justice.

"He must not wage any war again against the innocent northern Uganda civilians. I pray the LRA leader faces reality this time," he said.

Other former Amuka combatants like George Okulu of Apala, a community near Lira, do not think it necessary to await the signing before seizing Kony.

As long as the talks continue, the army should hunt the rebels, Okulu said. "They will run back home if we follow them from their hideouts," he added.

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