

## **Oil War Fears**

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Growing military clashes between Uganda and DRC over oil threaten to turn into a full-blown war. Uganda officially ended its involvement in warfare in the neighbouring Congo in 2003 when a transitional government was installed that was meant to end a decade of conflict involving eight African nations and some 25 armed groups in which an estimated four million people died.

While the guns between Uganda and its giant neighbour, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, DRC, have been silent for four years, clashes between the two countries' armies have broken out again.

Tensions began to rise at the end of July when a Congolese unit of the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo, FARDC, captured four Ugandan marines who had apparently strayed towards the Congolese west bank of Lake Albert.

But on August 1, the situation grew serious. FARDC soldiers patrolling the lake attacked an oil exploration barge belonging to Canada's Heritage Oil Corporation and killed a British seismic engineering survey team leader, 31-year-old Carl Nefdt. The Ugandan army retaliated and a Congolese soldier died in the 15-minute shoot-out while a Ugandan soldier was wounded.

Since then, tension has been mounting along that part of the Uganda-Congo frontier that runs north-south down the 160 kilometre-long lake - although the alignment of the border has never been precisely defined.

Lake Albert, in the Great Rift Valley, is one of the sources of the Nile and is Africa's seventh largest lake. Rich oil reserves have been discovered beneath its eastern, Ugandan, shores and in the sediments below lake. Production is expected to begin in 2009, bringing the Ugandan government rich rewards in royalties and taxes.

Following the discovery of oil in what geologists term the Albertine Basin, beneath the lake, both the Ugandan and Congolese armies have been deploying heavily around the shores, with some observers saying there is now a threat of all-out war.

"In normal circumstances, the world over, resources are shared between nations but if the parties don't approach the problem in a civilised manner, it can degenerate into war," Joseph Mazinga, a Ugandan political scientist and researcher, told IWPR.

A senior Ugandan lawyer, Musa Ssekaana, concurred, saying, "There is no clear demarcation of the border. Unless both countries come together and solve the problem, they will go to war over the oil resources."

The Congolese and Ugandan governments dispute the ownership of the lake's hitherto obscure Rukwanzi Island, less than three kilometres wide, at its southern end near the scene of the August 1 clash.

"Oil deposits span across the Ugandan and Congolese borders and if the matter of sharing this resource is not addressed in a sober manner these clashes will degenerate into war," warned Mazinga.

He said the Ugandan government was open to criticism because it claimed the newly discovered oil reserves beneath the lake as its own without first entering into a survey agreement with the DRC government to delineate the international frontier more accurately.

Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni and his Congo counterpart, Joseph Kabila, held a summit meeting in Tanzania on September 8 in an attempt to sort out the border dispute. They agreed that the border dispute and the sharing of oil and other resources which straddle the frontier should be resolved by diplomatic means - although they put on ice a resumption of diplomatic relations, which have been severed since the time of the 1997-2003 Congo wars.

However, the ink was scarcely dry on the presidential signatures to their Tanzanian accord when another military clash erupted on the lake on September 24, leaving six Congolese nationals including a soldier dead and five others injured. The dead included a young child.

Both sides have been giving conflicting accounts of the incident.

The Ugandan military said the fighting was triggered when soldiers attached to the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Congo, MONUC, allegedly seized a Heritage Oil prospecting barge. Two Congolese soldiers and a Ugandan died in the clash. The Ugandan government said that the Congolese army fired at its soldiers when they tried to retrieve the barge.

In a confused situation, the French News Agency, AFP, on September 27 quoted Heritage Oil as saying that the boat that was attacked was not its own. MONUC was also quoted by the news agency as saying that it was merely escorting the boat which the Ugandans sprayed with gunfire.

And Okapi Radio, a UN-funded community radio station in the Congo, said eight Ugandan marines aboard a motorised dinghy had approached a civilian boat carrying about forty passengers and opened fire after two Congolese soldiers aboard refused to give up their weapons.

The two Great Lakes Region states first fought each other in 1998 when Uganda sent its soldiers across the Congo border on the grounds that it wanted to fight dissidents based there.

Uganda had earlier backed the Rwandan forces that helped a band of Congolese dissidents to oust the government of the late military dictator Mobutu Sese Seko. But Uganda later turned against Mobutu's successor, Laurent Desire Kabila.

Kabila was assassinated in January 2001 and was succeeded by his son and current Congolese president Joseph Kabila.

After accusing the late Kabila of arming dissidents, Ugandan troops occupied city after city in the east and north-east of the giant country formerly known as Zaire. But under international pressure and following cries by human rights groups that Ugandan forces were committing atrocities against civilians and looting Congo's resources, the occupation forces, including others from Rwanda, began pulling out in 2003 and were replaced by the 17,500-strong MONUC force.

Congo later took Uganda to the International Court of Justice, which hears disputes between states in The Hague, saying its forces raped, tortured and killed civilians and looted gold, diamond and timber resources. Uganda lost the case and has been ordered to pay war reparations.

“These [current] border clashes are like to increase,” Musa Ssekaana told IWPR. “We need an international arbitrator under the arrangements of international law to resolve the dispute. The DR Congo is very suspicious of Uganda, especially as the latter was very fast in exploring the oil before Congo which hasn’t tapped her resources.”

Uganda has in the past threatened to re-enter DRC on the grounds that its government is not taking any action against Ugandan rebels based there, including the Lord’s Resistance Army, LRA, who are occupying parts of Garamba National Park in the north-east of the country.

Though silently beefing up its security along Congo’s border, the Ugandan government is waving off fears of a war with the DRC.

“That is far-fetched. We have no cause to fight,” Information Minister Ali Kirunda Kivejinja told IWPR. “In any case, the issues have been pushed to higher-level talks. The factor of oil is not there. The reasons for the clashes are territorial claims, and in this the Congo is wrong. The map is clear and we have the island [Rukwanzi] on our side.”

Kivejinja blamed the clashes on the Congo government’s lack of control over much of the country, into which the whole of Western Europe could be comfortably fitted.

“Historically, Congo has never had a stable government,” he said. “A democratically-elected government has just been put in place. But Congo has never been a real governed state. It is just a geographical entity and there is no government in most parts of it, and that is why we went there in 1998 to safeguard our border.

“The UN is there in the Congo but it is failing because the clashes have occurred. It will take time before the Congolese government grasps the whole country.”

Henry Wasswa is an IWPR journalist in Uganda.

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