

## **Peace Deal Dissolves**

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Rebel leader again fails to meet negotiators, dimming hopes of permanent peace being signed. Northern Uganda leaders returned empty handed last week from South Sudan after waiting in vain for days to meet Joseph Kony, the elusive commander of the rebel Lord's Resistance Army, LRA.

Kony's no-show was the second time in two months that he has snubbed peace negotiators and appears to have killed what hope remained that a peace deal, 22 months in the making, will be signed.

"Kony said he wanted to meet the elders," said Colonel Walter Ochora, the Gulu district commissioner who had helped initiate links with the rebels earlier in the negotiations. "Government knew this wouldn't happen, but we still said okay. All the behaviour of Kony [doesn't] indicate that he wants peace."

Ochora said he was not surprised by Kony's actions.

"To me the peace process was off right from tenth May, 2008 when Kony failed to show up," he said. "But as we did not want the government to be blamed [for the failure], we wanted to give Kony the benefit of the doubt."

Kony had earlier failed to turn up for a scheduled signing of the peace agreement on April 10, at a remote location on the border of South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, DRC, even though some 200 people traveled to the jungle to witness the event.

Kony then said he wanted to meet with his fellow ethnic Acholi leaders on May 10 at the same location for talks about how he might be treated by Ugandan courts if he would sign the deal.

Reliable sources told IWPR that instead, Kony issued demands for money, protection, and a mansion in the Ugandan capital, Kampala.

Ochora said Kony has refused to communicate with or meet the top negotiators since last October when he reportedly killed his second-in-command, Vincent Otti.

Those top negotiators include United Nations special envoy Joachim Chissano; chief mediator and vice president of South Sudan, Riek Machar; and South Sudan president Salva Kiir.

"These are the three most important people in the negotiation process, but he doesn't want to talk them," said Ochora. "The last time he sent a message to Machar, it was through a third party."

Ugandan interior minister Ruhakana Rugunda, leader of the Uganda delegation, indicated his frustration at the collapsed talks by noting that Kony had been rebuilding his army while frustrating efforts to finalise the northern Ugandan peace deal.

Kony has led a rebel war in the north since 1986 that has left an estimated 100,000 dead and displaced nearly two million people, who only recently have begun returning to their homes following nearly two years of peace talks.

As IWPR reported earlier, Kony has rebuilt his force while holed up in the Garamba Park region of northeastern DRC – and now has about 600 or 700 fighters and about 300 others still in training.

The rebuilding of the rebel force has been accomplished through abductions in the DRC, South Sudan and the lawless southeastern corners of the Central African Republic.

Rugunda told IWPR that such reports show Kony is not interested in peace.

“We have covered at least 95 per cent of this [peace] process,” said Rugunda. “The remaining five per cent was only for the two parties to append their signatures, which has not yet happened.”

“We cannot say the talks are dead,” he continued, but added that the government was unsure if the talks would resume. “We will have to wait and see the report of the chief mediator and the elders.”

For some, however, the peace talks are over.

Speaking in Gulu, Kenneth Oketta, “prime minister” of the Acholi ethnic group which dominates the north, said tribal leaders were finished talking with Kony.

“This is the last time we shall [go] to him because just one man cannot be holding everyone in his palms,” said Oketta. “Kony will never sign a peace accord because he doesn’t [have] anything to do with the peace talks. He is there because he was pushed to be there.”

Oketta has been in touch with the Acholi paramount leader, David Acana, who was part of the delegation waiting for Kony, and confirmed that the LRA leader had issued new demands.

“The last time we went to meet Kony in April, those demands were not there,” said Oketta, and suggested that the new ones came from “bad advisers” who apparently have a lot of influence over Kony.

The apparent collapse of the talks has renewed speculation of a possible military strike against Kony – a possibility that was raised recently by officials with the International Criminal Court, ICC, in The Hague.

Speaking to IWPR in Chicago, Chief Prosecutor Luis Moreno-Ocampo suggested that a special unit of UN forces currently in the region, as part of some 17,000 peacekeeping contingent in the DRC, could be mobilised to strike Kony.

Kony and his top commanders have been sought for trial by the ICC since October 2005 when they were indicted for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

An attempt at the beginning of 2006 to move against Kony failed when eight Guatemalan peacekeepers, members of a special forces unit, died in a clash with LRA fighters in Garamba Park.

"The unit, which was conducting an operation in this area, established contact with rebel elements at 6 am. There followed an exchange of fire lasting four hours, requiring the intervention of armed helicopters," a UN statement said at the time.

A UN military spokesman said at least 15 LRA fighters were killed, out of a group estimated to number 50 or 60. Five members of the peacekeeping force were injured in the incident and were flown to hospital in Bunia, several hundred kilometres south of the park.

Any future military move by the UN, Uganda, or others will require some coordination, said Ochora.

A week ago, Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni met his DRC counterpart Joseph Kabila in Tanzania, apparently to discuss a smoldering border dispute and the situation with Kony and the LRA.

"Kony has been a pain to the DR Congo," said Ochora. "[Kony] has abducted many children from there. He could choose to involve himself in Darfur. He has caused problems in Sudan, the Central Africa Republic, and now Chad is on the alert. We will have to discuss with all these countries about the way forward."

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