

Peace Talks Stumble Again

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Confusion, fear and conflicting demands dog renewed Juba negotiations.

Peace talks between Ugandan officials and the rebel Lord's Resistance Army, LRA, resumed last week with high hopes of a speedy agreement - but that optimism was quickly dashed after a series of setbacks.

Those closest to the talks in Juba, South Sudan, had been predicting a deal by the end of February, but since their resumption last week they've been plagued by the same sort of confusion, fear and conflicting demands that have been evident since negotiations began in July 2006.

As the talks got underway, the LRA was confronted with claims that its members were responsible for the deaths of four civilians in the Kajo-kegi area of the Central Equatoria state in South Sudan, which borders Uganda - allegations they denied.

"We have no connection with the recent attacks on civilians," LRA delegation team leader David Nyekorach Matsanga told IWPR. "Why would we put the lives of millions of people at risk by attacking civilians?"

Matsanga, who only two weeks ago abruptly replaced former team leader Martin Ojul in a major reshuffle of the LRA negotiating team, vowed that the rebels would do nothing to jeopardise the delicate peace talks.

"We cannot know who [is] responsible for the recent killings until the monitoring committee in the SPLA issues a statement identifying the killers," he said, referring to South Sudan's army which is patrolling the region.

Officials in South Sudan said they were at a loss as to who was responsible for the attacks.

Matsanga said the problem was that "there are too many guns in the hands of civilians in parts of the border region", and some of them are hoping to sabotage the talks and want to undermine the LRA.

But problems inside the talks may be the biggest hurdles.

The latest demand to surface from the LRA negotiators was that the people of northern and northwestern Uganda - the same people who voted against the re-election of President Yoweri Museveni in 2006 - should get a third of the top military and government appointments following a peace deal.

The demand renews a request that surfaced shortly after the talks began in 2006 that a north-south power sharing arrangement be made or that the north be given limited autonomy.

Although Uganda recently approved an Equal Opportunities Act which was to address the regional balance

of government posts, officials are unwilling to commit to specific figures.

The spokesman for the Kampala delegation at the Juba talks, Captain Chris Magezi, said this week that the government will have a power-sharing programme up and running within six months of the peace deal being signed. But LRA negotiators say the commitment is too vague.

"If you are going to marry my daughter, saying so is not enough. You have to tell me how many cows you are going to give and when," said Dr James Obita, the deputy head of the LRA delegation.

Most worrisome for the talks, however, is that negotiators appear to have put aside what remains the core issue: ensuring top rebel leaders, including Kony, are brought to justice.

Kony and two of his commanders still face charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity by the International Criminal Court, ICC, in The Hague.

Two indicted LRA leaders have died since charges were made against them. The latest being deputy LRA commander Vincent Otti, who Kony has admitted to executing in October.

Kony has refused to surrender to the ICC, and he's just as opposed to being tried in the Ugandan courts.

The talks were nearly derailed last week when a US envoy, sent as an observer, was named as the source of a document suggesting that the ICC drop the charges against Kony and that he place himself under house arrest and face prosecution in Uganda.

Titled "Scenario for Peace and Justice in Northern Uganda", the document was attributed to Timothy Shortley, senior adviser to US Assistant Secretary for African Affairs Jendayi Frazer, who named Shortley as a US observer to the peace talks last October.

The appointment was made despite the fact that the US government has labeled the LRA an international terrorist group and therefore not to be negotiated with. In addition, Washington has refused to ratify the international treaty that created the ICC.

The suggestion that Kony surrender to the Uganda authorities so angered the rebel leader that he reportedly ordered his negotiators not to sign any agreements on reconciliation and accountability, the third of five elements of the proposed peace agreement, which is currently on the agenda.

"That document has created a lot of discomfort in the LRA camp," Matsanga told Uganda's New Vision newspaper. "The American government has been handling it with some LRA individuals in Kampala, behind the LRA high command's back."

Shortley reportedly left the talks shortly after the controversy erupted.

The LRA delegation has argued in recent months that people in northern Uganda have opted for local justice over the ICC, Matsanga told IWPR in Juba. Kony has insisted that he's only prepared to submit to traditional tribal reconciliation ceremonies.

Following the latest talks impasse, negotiators have moved on to discussing a permanent ceasefire agreement and disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration.

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