

Police and Army Accused of Crimes

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Northerners alarmed by spate of crimes allegedly committed by security forces.

Police officer Anthony Okello was imprisoned last week after being accused of blindfolding a suspected criminal and shooting him dead in front of residents of a Lira neighbourhood.

The victim, Tom Adim, 27, was one of seven men who had been arrested for alleged rape, robbery, theft, and murder. He and the others escaped from prison after apparently bribing a jailer to set them free.

Adim was reportedly killed when Lira police mounted an operation to re-arrest the suspects.

Geoffrey Engin, another escapee, was also killed by police during the same incident, according to Lira resident district commissioner Joan Pacoto.

Pacoto says at least 13 police officers have been arrested in connection with the killing of Engin and Adim, "We have put them in [jail] to help the police with investigations, and we shall continue bringing more people."

Pacoto described the killings of the suspects as shameful.

Police station commander Cosmas Ruganzu said all officers suspected of involvement in the deaths of the two men would be prosecuted.

Community leader Peter Okello said the killings reminded him of actions by the Lord's Resistance Army, LRA, rebels who fought the Ugandan government in the north for 20 years. The rebels are now in the northern Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC.

Okello said that unlike Adim, Engin was shot repeatedly by police as he attempted to flee.

"I was ten metres away when they started shooting him," Okello told IWPR, adding that he pleaded with the officers not to kill Adim as well.

"After killing [Adim] the same officer turned his gun to me, but he didn't fire it, otherwise, I would also have been killed."

As the north begins to enjoy relative peace since the rebels ceased fighting in 2006, such reports of killings by police and army officers have both residents and regional officials worried.

Community leaders say that the availability of illegal guns – in part, because weapons have been

abandoned by the rebels – combined with the abuse of authority by some in the security agencies has created a new threat.

Most notably, three Ugandan army soldiers were recently arrested after being accused of ambushing and terrorising travelers on the Lira-Kitgum highway.

The accused soldiers were captured during an operation mounted by a military intelligence unit.

The suspects are also believed to be linked with a crime ring that has been ambushing and looting commercial trucks on the same route.

Army spokesman Captain Deo Akiki said the soldiers were attached to Kitgum Field Hospital.

Officials said they were unsure about the motive for the robberies, telling IWPR that salaries paid to the army are considered adequate.

They called for harsh penalties for those caught abusing their powers.

“Those who tarnish our image by terrorising civilians and robbing their properties should be hanged,” said one official who asked not to be identified.

The soldiers are set to appear before a military court in Pader district, and if found guilty, face sentences of at least four years in prison, according to Akiki.

“We have been suspecting such bad seeds within our forces and we are applying [our] intelligence network to apprehend them,” he said.

“The [Ugandan army] does not condone such behaviour.”

Akiki said the army continues to investigate the suspected crime ring, which recently ambushed a commercial vehicle on the road and stole several hundred US dollars. The military spokesman urged traders not to carry large sums of money and instead use banks to transfer money from one area to another.

Meanwhile, the alleged killing of the two suspected criminals by police has prompted some Lira residents to leave the area.

Beatrice Amolo, 66, said that she and her three grandchildren, Amos, Lona, and Apio, left after witnessing the incident and have refused to return.

“Since that day, I started losing confidence in our security agencies because of the brutal act they committed at my home,” said Amolo.

Patrick Okin is an IWPR-trained journalist.

Location: Democratic Republic of Congo

Topic: Uganda

Focus: ICC - International Criminal Court

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