

Rebels Deny Otti Execution Rumours

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Reports suggested senior LRA commander had been killed after dispute with rebel chief. The Lord's Resistance Army, LRA, delegation at the South Sudan-mediated peace talks today, November 1, rejected reports that LRA second-in-command, Vincent Otti, has been executed.

They also denied there has been any falling out between the LRA leader, Joseph Kony, and Otti, who they insist has been struck down with a cholera-like illness.

This comes as the LRA prepare for an historic meeting in Kampala with Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni; the rebel delegation then moving on to northern Uganda to consult war victims on the peace agreement with Kampala.

There were persistent rumours on Wednesday, October 31, that Otti, one of the LRA commanders wanted by the Hague-based International Criminal Court, ICC, for war crimes and crimes against humanity, had been shot dead by Kony over a financial dispute, concerning funds for the consultation phase of the peace process.

But the rebels' lead negotiator, Martin Ojul, insisted the speculation had no foundation. "The rumour circulating that Otti was executed by Kony is baseless," Ojul told IWPR in a phone interview from the South Sudan capital, Juba.

The Uganda People's Defence Force, UPDF, spokesperson, Major Felix Kulayigye, when contacted by IWPR for comment, said the military were still looking into the rumours.

"We have also heard about the same rumour. We are trying to find out whether he is dead or alive," Kulayigye told IWPR by phone.

Yusuf Adek, a member of the LRA delegation to the Juba talks and an adviser to Kony, told a local radio station in Gulu, northern Uganda, that Otti is seriously sick and bedridden at the rebels' base in Garamba National Park in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC.

An outbreak of cholera has been reported at Garamba and Ri-Kwangba on the DRC- South Sudan border. Ri-Kwangba is one of two sites at which the LRA are expected to gather under the terms of a cessation of hostilities agreement.

"Otti is sick as a result of an ailment caused by an outbreak of a dysentery-like disease and other health complications," said Ojul, but insists he will "soon be on the airwaves to put the prophets of doom to shame".

Adek said that other LRA men had also been struck down by the cholera outbreak. "The disease has so far killed two of our soldiers. Many others are ill. The situation has been aggravated by heavy rains in the area," he said.

Cholera, a bacterial disease that affects the intestinal tract, is spread by eating or drinking food or water contaminated by the faecal waste of an infected person.

Some sources suggest Otti was being treated in a hospital in Khartoum, but this could not be confirmed.

Kony has a reputation for killing commanders who disagree with him. In December 1999, he disposed of his army commander, Otti Lagony, after a long-running disagreement. And in 2003, he ordered the execution of James Opoka, a former aide to Forum for Democratic Change leader Kizza Besigye, whom he suspected of trying to take over the leadership of the LRA.

The LRA peace team has vehemently denied there is any disagreement between Kony and his deputy.

In a press statement emailed to IWPR, Ojul said, "I want to allay fears caused by speculative media coverage that there has been a sharp division within LRA ranks."

But in another development, former LRA commander Opiyo Makasi, who fled the Garamba base with his wife early last month, insisted that relations between Kony and Otti and other commanders had deteriorated.

"This rift has been going on for the last one and half years, up to the time it forced me out. It's not only between Kony and Otti, it's also among commanders," Makasi told the Kampala-based Monitor newspaper.

The speculation over Otti comes as the LRA prepare to meet Museveni and canvass the views of northerners on the reconciliation and accountability section of the peace agreement.

Speaking to the BBC, the LRA spokesman Godfrey Ayoo admitted that the rebel delegation was concerned about their security but determined to press ahead with the consultation process.

"The value of what we are doing starting today is much higher than the fear. We want this to be the last conflict in Uganda whereby people will never again take up weapons to resolve their problems," he said.

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