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THE WAR IN THE NORTH:
REPETITION OF A TRAGEDY

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THE WAR IN THE NORTH*

The war in the north has come to attract a great deal of attention, not only internally but also internationally. This is not simply because of the casualties inflicted on the rebels as well as on civilians who have been caught in the savage crossfire of the war. The war has attracted the attention of the world because it has come to be seen as a real test for effectiveness or otherwise of the NRM Administration. The enemies of the NRM see it as a God-sent gift not only to discredit the Government of President Museveni in the eyes of the outside world but, perhaps more important for them, as a means of crippling the efforts of our Movement to rescue our country from the vicious circle of savageness, poverty and incessant sufferings which have bedevilled our land for so long.

It is important to recall a few facts before we plunge into the story. It will be remembered that when, in January 1986, the NRM/NRA forces stormed into Kampala and captured state power, the old system that had been used by the past dictatorial regimes from Amin to Obote and Okello-Lutwa was swept away. Peace returned to our land. But it was not until about March 1986 that the remnants of the UNLA soldiers were completely routed in hot pursuit all the way through the east to the north of our country. Many of the UNLA soldiers surrendered to the NRA and many of them have subsequently been absorbed into the national army. There were

*For the information contained in the first part of this essay, I am indebted to Kale's article, 'War in Northern Uganda: What is the Future', which appeared in The 6th of February, March/April, 1987.

however, many of the UNLA soldiers who either refused to surrender and thereby continued to roam in the countryside of Northern Uganda with their arms intact, or who crossed the border and entered southern Sudan. It is these latter two groups of ex-UNLA soldiers whom dissident Acholi elements, inside and outside Uganda, are using to fight the NRM Government.

The rebels who are fighting the NRA in the north are not a coherent group. It would appear, according to the NRA Officers commanding the war in the north, that there are at least three rebel groups. First, there is the UPDA which largely constitutes criminal elements formerly in the UNLA. The leadership is based in London. Their cause for fighting the NRM Administration is simply because they believe they are the born-warrior Acholi in whose hands the leadership of the country must always rest.

The second group consists of the so-called 'Celo Bongo' (meaning "attack, raid and loot"). According to the NRA Officers fighting in the north:

This group consists of village thieves, who go masquerading as Karamojong cattle raiders, and steal cattle, goats and sheep of the peasants. This is a bandit group that has no political content but is used by the other groups to terrorise the people.

(From 'War in Northern Uganda', The 6th of February. March/April 1987).

The third group, known as 'the Holy Spirit Movement', is reputed to be the largest. We are told that this group is constituted by ex-UNLA soldiers, and 'the moral force behind it is a lunatic prostitute of Gulu town turned witch, called Alice Lakwena, or Alice "the disciple".' According

to Kale in his report in The 6th of February, the tactics they use is a combination of superstition and other coercive measures, thereby managing to scare the people in the Districts of Gulu and Kitgum. It is said that either out of ignorance or because of its usefulness as an instrument to mobilise ignorant people, all the rebels have put themselves under the authority of Lakwena's witchcraft. As if we are witnessing a drama staged by half-made idiots, we are told by Commander Kale - in his article already referred to above:

that From statements of prisoners of war, the objectives of the 'Holy Spirit' Group is to bring peace to Uganda and develop Gulu. According to their programme as soon as Kampala falls, all the state functions currently taking place in Kampala, and state institutions will be transferred to Gulu, including the Bank of Uganda and Uganda Commercial Bank, to ensure that Gulu and Kitgum Districts are developed 'at last'.

This passage, purportedly incorporating the views of the rebels, does also indicate the extent to which lunacy has also sunk into the minds of those who are fighting the NRM Government in the north. From what they have proclaimed to the world, it is abundantly clear that the rebels have no justified and rational cause to fight.

Perhaps let us retrace our steps by somewhat going back to August last year when the fighting began. In August 1986, as we have already remarked, a group of desperate soldiers, mainly the remnants of the UNLF army of Tito Okello and Bazilio Okello attacked Gulu, the major town of Anholi. Although they were beaten off before they came to anything near capturing the town, there was a lot of fighting which

caused panic among the civilian population. The loss of lives was also great. From then on war has continued to rage in the Districts of Gulu and Kitgum of Acholi, into which the civilian population has been drawn. The result of all this has been the rendering of the two districts almost ungovernable, with the NRA determined to pursue and hit hard the rebels.

Fighting soon spread to Lango, particularly in Lira District. As the intensity of disturbances increased, so did the massacres of civilians by the rebels who accused the civilians of lending support to the NRM Administration. In the process, some officials of the Resistance Committees were attacked and in some cases killed. As if this was not enough, supporters of the defeated and deposed Obote in Eastern Region, particularly in Tese, rose in rebellion. Simultaneous to all these rebellions, emerged the Karamojong cattle-raiders who rampaged the neighbouring territories. In such a state of war-activities, ordinary criminal elements have joined the defeated soldiers of UNLA and Obote's supporters in bringing about a situation which can only be described as Thomas Hobbe's version of 'man in state of nature'.

Fighting is still going on in the north and east, although most of the fighting is actually in the north - that is, in Acholi where the rebellion started first. The situation in the east is improving and apart from cattle rustling which, as is well known, is an endemic disease of the region, rebel activities of political nature are clearly subsiding.

As we have already noted, recently new political factors were added to the already complicated issue. Early in March

this year a new political party was formed in London, grouping all those whom the NRM had fought against and defeated in the liberation war which began in February 1981. We have noted that the new party was named Uganda Patriotic Democratic Movement and its Chairman and leader is no other than Otema-Alimadi, former Prime Minister in Obote-Two Government until 1985 when they were toppled from power. In addition to the UPDM, there are other groupings centred round Juma Oris, Amin and other assortments of Discredited leaders. On 15 April 1987 the UFM announced that it had regrouped under the leadership of Francis Bwengye, a former Secretary General of DP, and Dr. Semu Nsibirwa who lives in Nairobi, in order to go back to the bush and fight the Government of Yoweri Museveni. Francis Bwengye and Semu Nsibirwa are the two people whom The New Vision of 21 April 1987 called 'second-rate politicians with delusions of grandeur'. The same paper referred to the new Chairman and 'finance-operator' of the UFM as 'a Nairobi doctor who few people have ever heard of and who if he is a genuine patriot, would have returned home a long time ago'.

Among the reasons Francis Bwengye has advanced for having decided to fight the NRM is that President Yoweri Museveni had not kept his agreement with the UFM which was promised a lot more Cabinet seats and ambassadorships than what it eventually got. Here Francis Bwengye comes out in his true colours as an opportunist. Who doesn't know the opportunistic moves of UFM immediately after the fall of Obote in July 1985? It will be remembered that the UFM, which had been a moribund fighting movement since about the

beginning of 1983, immediately and mysteriously emerged after the fall of Obote in 1985. Its leader, Andrew Kayiira, rushed into the Ugandan capital from his home in New Haven, Connecticut in the United States, and became a member of Okello-Lutwa's Military Commission. His UFM fighters joined Tito Okello-Lutwa's UNLF in fighting against Museveni's NRM/NRA. Indeed, in mid January 1986 Kayiira went on to condemn Yoweri Museveni for having continued the war against Okello-Lutwa after the Peace Agreement had been signed in Nairobi in December 1985.

Even more startling events were to occur. Just before Kampala fell, Kayiira turned quickly his fighting forces against Okello-Lutwa's army. As one observer has commented, 'This move many interpreted as being a desperate desire on Kayiira's part to clear himself of any implication that he had been involved in the misdeeds of Okello's junta and to win for himself a place in Museveni's government.' Indeed, Kayiira's gamble paid off because Museveni nominated him Minister of Energy when the NRM Administration was formed.

It was not made clear whether the UFM would join the rebels in the north to fight the NRM, but inasmuch as they said they would join anybody who was fighting Museveni it was to be inferred that the UFM too, at least those in the faction of Bwengye and Dr. Nsibirwa, would not mind joining hands with the Acholi rebels who are fighting the NRM. Such has been the twist of history in the recent times.

Let us once again ask ourselves that important question we have already raised, namely: what are the rebels in the north really fighting for? We know they are fighting the NRM.

But we do not understand what they are really fighting for. In view, however, of the importance of the issue let me summarise here the position, as I understand it, of the NRM Administration on the war in the north as enunciated by our leader, Mr. Yoweri Museveni, when he was opening the second session of the NRC in April this year.

In the view of the NRM, the war in the north is no more than 'a resurgence of the rear-guard actions of the defeated, moribund, sectarian and new-colonial elements' who were in the service of the two Okellos, Obote and Muwanga. They are criminal elements 'that have caused untold suffering to the people of Uganda, (and) violated the sovereignty of the people of Uganda'. The NRA has had no alternative but to unleash a vicious counter-attack which has annihilated the rebels. To-date about 3,000 enemies have been confirmed killed and 2,000 weapons have been captured from the bandit forces in Kitgum, Gulu and Lira Districts. Similar successes have been scored against the enemies in Teso and Karamoja areas. Other punitive actions have been taken against FOBA elements operating out of Kenya and causing disruptions of transport and other economic activities in the east.

These figures of casualties on the part of the enemies are published by the NRM Administration because the NRM has nothing to hide from the people of Uganda and the world at large. The war the NRM is waging against the insurgents in the north has the support of the peasants of Uganda who were rescued by the NRM/NRA from the humiliation and acts of banditry at the hands of the very people that the NRM is now fighting. The NRM has no guilt-conscience over the issue

because what it is doing is a reflection of the policy which is supported by the masses of our nation who have suffered so much at the hands of these backward, barbaric and uncouth soldiers who were serving the colonial system until that system was swept away from our country. That is why we consider it important for the whole world to know whom we are fighting against so that they are not hood-winked by bankrupt and professionally corrupt politicians who are now masquerading in Europe and elsewhere as the leaders of a new movement to save Uganda from dictatorship.

There is also another crucial point to emphasise. We have stressed the fact that those rebels in the north have not got any legitimate political demand to make. The NRM Administration is always, as President Museveni has emphasised it now and again, 'ready to discuss any political problem'. Indeed, as he has laboured to explain, 'we have accommodated many political tendencies at the level of national government by forming a very broad-based administration'. The NRM has gone further to accommodate the genuine wishes of the people, by forming Resistance Councils and Resistance Committees right from the grassroots whereby the people themselves do elect representatives of their choice. This process, which will soon reach the district level, will give real powers to these grassroot organs: 'vetting chiefs, security and defence personnel; adjudicating in minor cases; giving licences to traders instead of the Ministry of Commerce; playing the role of the Police, etcetera'. Why, as President Museveni put it, 'should then any genuine element be against this process? Can taking up arms against this process be for legitimate

aspiration to be accommodated?' Must blood be shed and lives be lost so that discredited and defeated political and military anti-people elements should come back to power and 'eat'?

The rebels in the north have no genuine and legitimate cause to fight the NRM Administration and therefore the NRM and its many supporters in this land have the moral and legitimate duty to fight and crush those bandits. The NRM has every moral right to fight those interests which oppose the process of democratisation of the people of Uganda. The causes of the anti-people elements in the north have no legitimacy because they have chosen to use violence in the quest of illegitimate usurpation of power. They will, therefore, be resisted to the end, largely because the leaders and followers of such an illegitimate war are sheer opportunists who want to use the innocent civilians to achieve their ill-gotten and indefensible rights. They will, alas, never be allowed to go further than they have so far gone, for the NRM is determined not to be defeated where important principles are concerned. We consider that in present day Uganda, under the NRM Administration, there is no room for dissension, fighting and even going into exile. This is because in our society today the opposition - for we are not naive as to deny that it exists - is allowed within the law where every human being has legal rights that are respected by government and citizens alike. The rebels believe in fighting and fighting. They should however remember that the defence and maintenance of peace and stability in Acholi would depend on mutual NRM/Acholi willpower, not on the location of

conventional firepower. Indeed, the tactics - both political and military - chosen and deployed by the rebels cannot but land them into the pit of defeat. They have provided a sharp knife to the NRA and in the process have impaled themselves on it.

But not all is lost. We appreciate that this war cannot be allowed to go for ever. It is sapping the energies of everyone, which should otherwise go into the rehabilitation and reconstruction of our motherland. As I have indicated elsewhere in these essays, the NRM has no quarrel with the Acholi or Langi people. Our quarrel is with the bad leaders of yesteryears. We have to pull our resources together and we cannot afford to let ourselves be bogged down in unnecessary wars and conflicts.

There is, therefore, a need for reconciliation. There is a need for dialogue. There is a need for all Ugandans to realise that we are all brothers and sisters with one home. We need each other. The development we crave for can only come if we act together and in harmony. That is why we need to forgive each other. It may be difficult, as I have again suggested elsewhere, to forget the sufferings which some of us have undergone at the hands of those very people who are now causing insecurity in the north and east. We may never forget the atrocities of the UNLF army, under the command and political leadership of the two Okellos, Muwanga and Obote. Yes, we know that we will never forget the wrongs that were done to us. But at least we can forgive those who wronged us. Patriotism may demand that we do so.

But there is one important point to grasp. We can forgive those who were misled or who were simply following bad orders, but surely we cannot forgive those who committed crimes such as murders, rape and kidnappings. Those will have to face the laws of the land for the horrid and repugnant crimes they committed against the people of Uganda. Indeed, some of these crimes were committed against humanity as a whole. We cannot forgive and embrace such people who committed crimes and whose hands are still dripping with blood of our relations and friends whom they butchered in Kampala, in Luwero and Mpigi Districts, in West Nile and in so many other places in Uganda.

However, an amnesty has been announced by the NRM Administration. While opening the second session of the NRC in April this year, the President announced the offer of an amnesty to all those rebels who are prepared to lay down their arms. He also announced that an amnesty document had been produced and would be published soon. He called upon the rebels to take advantage of this offer of amnesty and come back to a settled life in Uganda. The NRM has offered to resettle the rebels who will surrender like it has done with others who fought against it before. Such an offer, if embraced in good spirit in which it has been offered, will go a long way in ending the unnecessary war-like activities which are only bringing grievous losses to the people of the north.

The amnesty that President Museveni has announced may at the moment amount to only three toes in the water. But surely the rest of the feet will follow soon particularly after

the NRM amnesty document is legalised by the NRC. But to accept to offer an amnesty should not be interpreted by our detractors as a surrender to the rebels. No country anywhere in the world can negotiate with criminals and those who do not want peace. Indeed a political solution with the rebels in the north can only be considered and perhaps entered into after peace has been restored in that area. What is even more important is the fact that if the NRM holds peace talks with the rebels, as indeed they should, then these talks must be held with peaceful, well-minded, well-balanced individuals, not with men bent on continuing to hide behind the curtains of repressions, murders and other heinous crimes.

Those, in a nutshell, are the few remarks I wished to make on the war now going on in the north, the prosecution of which is hindering the efforts of everyone to rebuild our battered nation. It is my hope and prayer that all these tragedies will soon pass into history.

22 APRIL 1987

POST-SCRIPT

Since writing the above piece in April this year, new and more serious developments have taken place in the war in the north and east of Uganda. The major development has been the rapid spread of fighting to the east, particularly in the districts of Kumi and Soroti.

The new intensity of rebel activities in the east started in June. Although, as we shall soon see, the rebels in the north spread their activities to the south, the new

fighting in Kumi and Soroti Districts has been spearheaded by rebels from this very region. Those responsible for fighting and who have therefore 'gone to the bush', are the ex-soldiers of the UNLA and Special Force personnel. These rebels, according to the Weekly Topic of 26 August 1987 (on which, in fact, this account is largely based), 'are the core of the "UPC" force, the active combatant group. Some few "civilians" form the groups of intelligence network.'

As usual, the victims are the innocent civilians who are caught in crossfire between the NRA soldiers and the rebels. Other victims killed are the 'misled youngsters in the name of rebels', Resistance Committee (RC) members and victims of the general intimidation of all known NRM government sympathisers. In the two Districts of Kumi and Soroti, RC Chairmen and members have had to flee or to resign their positions for fear of their lives or have been forced to keep a low profile. The rebels have also turned their fight against the NRA into an ethnic confrontation, for there is ample evidence that people of Bantu origin, especially Bakenyè, Basoga, Bagwere, Samia and Banyarwanda have borne the brunt of the rebels' persecution and brutality. These Bantu people have fled to the south from the two districts.

The situation in the east was further complicated when, early in July, rebel armies from Gulu, Kitgum, Apac, Lira and Karamoja moved south and converged in Soroti District. These rebel armies consisted of those armed groups that have been active in the north. These include sections of 'armies' of Uganda People's Democratic Movement (UPDM), Uganda People's Movement (UPM), Uganda Peoples' Front (UPF), Alice Lakwena's

Holy Spirit Movement and Karamojong cattle rustlers. The aim of all these rebel groups is to form a united front to 'defeat the NRA from the North-East in one or two major battles and then move on to Kampala.' These aims, it will be noted, are the same as those which Lakwena's 'Holy Spirit' group (as well as other Acholi groups) harboured when they launched their rebellion against the NRM Administration in August last year.

The rebel leadership in the east is as confused as that in the north. Those who claim to be the leaders of the rebel armies are either based in London or in other countries in Africa. Some of these leaders are Peter Otai, the former Minister of State for Defence and Col. Omania, the former Minister of State for Internal Affairs (in charge of Special Force). Both men claim the leadership of the rebellion in the east, which in fact amounts to no more than a rivalry for the leadership of the Teso nationality. To those two one can add a few other Teso politicians, some of whom were prominent in Obote's previous two regimes. Their aim in claiming leadership of the rebel forces is, of course, to place a stake should the cake (of victory) come one day to be shared.

The eruption of fighting in the east, particularly in the two Districts of Kumi and Soroti, does not of course mean that the war in the north is over. It is true that fighting there has subsided and that many of the civilians have started going back to their normal activities both in the towns and the country-side. But there are still many pockets of rebel activities; particularly in the two districts of Lango, namely: Apac and Lira, where the rebels

are now collaborating with Alice Lakwena's Holy Spirit army. According to the reports from there, the underlying uniting factor in all these armies as promised by their various leaders is not Obote but to recapture 'our state power from the Bantu, to loot Kampala, to grab houses and many cars and beautiful girls and to be officers in the army.'

In one of the several wild incidents in which Langi rebels have turned against their own people, in mid-August they went on rampage in Apac and Lira Districts killing indiscriminately, looting and burning homes. Among those killed were Okot-Odyek, former Member of Parliament for Lira Central (during Obote-II regime) and Stanley Opeto, father of deposed and former President, Milton Obote. The Langi rebels, in their pursuit for evil and destruction, found Obote's father, an old blind man, at his home in Akokoro and murdered him in cold blood. The old man's Langi tribesmen could not spare him simply because, as they put it, his son, Obote, 'is the one who caused all these problems for us.'

The general effect of the extension of the war to the east of Uganda has been to turn this region into a land of criminal and war-like activities. There are, it is true, some areas where peace still prevails and it is also true that all is not lost in the east. The people of Mbale, for instance, have made it clear that they do not want to be involved in the war, although people such as Masette-Kuya, a Mugishu himself and a former Minister of Rehabilitation in Obote's second regime, has tried his best to establish a rebel base in the areas of Mount Elgon. The peasants in Mbale have refused to co-operate with him, and they seek not

to take any sides in the conflict. What they pray for is that the war will not be fought on their territory.

All in all, therefore, the situation is still far from satisfactory in the two regions of north and east of Uganda. The many warlord armies there have turned the two regions into a large wild land. Those who continue to suffer are the peasants in whose name the warlords are claiming to be fighting the NRM Administration. But these war-lords are safely entrenched in London, Bonn or Nairobi. It is the poor peasants, bearing the brunt of a conflict the outcome of which they have no idea about, who remain the victims of a war that is caused by people who are power-hungry with a single ambition of being at the top. The majority of the people, who have no choice in the matter, continue to suffer. Many of them live as captives of the rebels who extort food and sometimes shelter from them. And all these unhappy have been disrupted. Only God can save these peasants from further punishments and even possible death at the hands of their own people.

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