

Offensive expected to continue against LRA in Congo

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December 15, 2008 (KAMPALA) - The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) is under attack in the northeastern corner of Congo, said the Ugandan army on Monday. Ugandan officials indicated Tuesday that the offensive will last for several weeks.

Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Southern Sudan attacked with planes on Sunday after LRA leader Joseph Kony repeatedly failed to show up to sign a peace agreement, which was finalised in April, brokered by former Sudanese guerrilla Riak Machar.

"Our principle objective is to flush LRA out of its hideout so they can return to the negotiating table," said Ugandan Foreign Minister Sam Kutesa. "Our operation is intended to be short-lived. We do not intend to occupy DRC forever."

The three countries' intelligence agencies issued a joint statement claiming that troops have destroyed the rebel stronghold in Garamba area.

Intelligence estimates have put the LRA strength at no more than 700 armed people, though their total ranks including unarmed members could be 2,000.

"We can confirm that most of (Kony's) camps have been set on fire," Ugandan army spokesman Major Paddy Ankunda told Reuters. "It was an air-led operation, then the ground forces were inserted."

Security Minister Amama Mbabazi argued in parliament that Kony has been using the peace talks to buy time to rebuild his force. On the other hand, MPs from northern Uganda, the original base of the rebel group and also the region most victimized by Kony's brutalities, condemned the raid.

"We had reliable intelligence that they were preparing to attack Uganda ... and also we had the ICC warrants," said Ankunda, referring to war crimes charges pinned on Kony and two deputies by the International Criminal Court.

The U.S. State Department spokesman Robert Wood acknowledged Monday, "we have these longstanding military-to-military relationships with the three countries," but also said, "we haven't been involved in any combat operations." But another U.S. official who declined to be identified told Reuters that Washington had provided equipment and helped plan the offensive.

"We welcome the activities that these countries have taken against the Lord's Resistance Army. All the Lord's Resistance Army has done over the last 20 years has caused havoc in those countries," said Wood.

A US activist figure also welcomed the offensive. Enough Project Co-Chair John Prendergast said, "The extensive efforts to encourage Joseph Kony to sign a peace deal were unsuccessful. A military strike was actually long overdue, to build leverage for peace or even to apprehend Kony and execute the arrest warrant from the International Criminal Court. This operation is the first step in a more realistic strategy to end the LRA threat."

LRA leader Kony is rose to prominence in a rebellion against the Ugandan government in 1988. His force is particularly well known for abducting and indoctrinating children by forcing them to commit atrocities.

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