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DRC-based Ugandan rebel group “recruiting, training”

KAMPALA, 11 July 2013 (IRIN) - The Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), a Ugandan rebel movement based in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), is recruiting, training and reorganizing to carry out fresh attacks on Uganda, officials say.

"The threat is real. ADF is recruiting, training and opening new camps in eastern DRC. We are alert and very prepared to deal with any attack on our side of the border," said Lt Col Paddy Ankunda, spokesman for the Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF). "We are sharing intelligence information with the DRC government [and] FARDC [DRC's national army] about their activities. We hope FARDC will be able to deal with the group."

According to media reports in DRC, early on Thursday morning the group clashed with FARDC in Kamango, a town in North Kivu Province close to the Ugandan border, briefly ousting the army before withdrawing. Uganda's NTV tweeted that thousands of Congolese had fled across the border to the western Ugandan town of Bundibugyo.

The ADF was formed in the mid-1990s in the Rwenzori mountain range in western Uganda, close to the country's border with DRC. The group killed hundreds in several attacks in the capital, Kampala, and in parts of western Uganda, and caused the displacement of tens of thousands. The rebellion was largely contained in Uganda by 2000, with reportedly just about 100 fighters finding refuge in eastern North Kivu. From the mid-1990s till 2007, ADF was allied to another Ugandan rebel group, the National Army for the Liberation of Uganda; together, becoming ADF-NALU.

The ADF's leader, Jamil Mukulu, a former Catholic, converted to Islam in the 1990s, and the Ugandan government has long claimed the group is linked with Islamist groups including Al-Qaeda and the Somali militant group Al-Shabab. The US placed the ADF on its list of terrorist organizations in 2001.

UPDF's Ankunda said: "There is no doubt; ADF has a linkage with Al-Shabab. They collaborate. They have trained ADF on the use of improvised explosive devices."

Kidnapping, recruitment

According to Ankunda, the ADF - now thought to have up to 1,200 fighters - has tried to increase its troop numbers through kidnapping and recruitment in North Kivu Province and in Uganda.

"What is worrying us is that the ADF has been carrying out a series of abductions, recruitment and attacks in DRC without much resistance from FARDC," Ankunda told IRIN. "We are critically

following up their recruitment in Uganda. We have made some arrests."

According to a December 2012 report by the International Crisis Group (ICG), the ADF is "more of a politically convenient threat for both the FARDC and the Ugandan government than an Islamist threat lurking at the heart of Central Africa".

"They are still isolated, and actions against their logistic and financial chains have been quite successful," Marc-Andre Lagrange, DRC senior analyst at ICG, told IRIN. "As in 2011, ADF are now engaged in providing military support to other armed groups to sustain their movement. This demonstrates that ADF, as such, is now a limited threat despite the fact they remain extremely violent."

According to experts in Uganda, the continued presence of armed groups like ADF is a major concern for peace and stability in DRC, Uganda and the wider Great Lakes region.

"The allegations that ADF is regrouping are not new and should not come as a surprise. What should worry us as a country is the apparent collective amnesia of treating our own exported armed insurgencies as other people's problems," Stephen Oola, a transitional justice and governance analyst at Uganda's Makerere University's Refugee Law Project, told IRIN. "The LRA [Lord's Resistance Army] and ADF are Uganda's problems and will remain so, no matter where they are located at a particular time, until we seek a comprehensive solution to conflicts in this country."

Neutralizing the threat

At the moment, Uganda has no mandate to pursue the rebels within DRC. Ankunda said he hoped the new UN Intervention Brigade - tasked with defeating "negative forces" in eastern DRC and due to be fully operational at the end of July - will step in to curb the group's efforts to destabilize the two countries.

The ICG's report warned that it would be important to neutralize the ADF's cross-border economic and logistical networks; the group allegedly receives money transfers from Kenya, the UK and Uganda, which are collected by Congolese intermediaries in the North Kivu cities of Beni and Butembo. It also derives funding from car and motorcycle taxis in North Kivu and profits from gold and timber exports to Uganda.

"It would be wise to separate fiction from fact and instead pursue a course of weakening its socio-economic base, while at the same time offering a demobilization and reintegration programme to its combatants," the report's authors stated, adding that "Congolese and Ugandan military personnel colluding with these networks should be dealt with appropriately by the authorities of their country".

According to Makerere's Oola, Uganda needs to do some soul-searching if it is to defeat the

rebellions that continue to destabilize the country: "We must sit down as country in judgment of oursel[ves], through truth-seeking and national dialogue, to ask the right questions. Why are they fighting? What should be done to end their rebellion? How do we address the impact of the cycle of violence that has bedevilled this country from independence?"

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