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Country Reports on Terrorism 2021: Uganda

Uganda

Overview: Uganda is considered to have one of the most effective security forces in the region with respect to CT capabilities. Nonetheless, in 2021 Uganda experienced the first terrorist incidents on home soil since the 2010 bombings claimed by al-Shabaab. Four bombings in October and November were attributed to and claimed by ISIS-DRC (also known in Uganda as the Allied Democratic Forces, or ADF); authorities also attributed the June attempted assassination of the Minister of Works and Transport and former Ugandan Chief of Defense Forces Gen. Katumba Wamala to the same group. The Uganda Peoples' Defence Forces (UPDF) began a joint operation with the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) in November to combat ISIS-DRC in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. Uganda also continued in its role as the top troop-contributing country to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), the international effort to combat al-Shabaab in Somalia.

2021 Terrorist Incidents: The following terrorist incidents took place in Uganda during 2021:

- On June 1, unknown assailants attempted to assassinate Gen. Wamala, also the highest ranking member of the Baganda ethnic group — the largest tribe in Uganda — serving in government. Assailants instead killed Wamala's daughter and driver in the attack on his vehicle. Security services arrested approximately 12 alleged conspirators (though the exact number remains unclear) and killed four, all with purported links to ISIS-DRC.
- In July and August, near Masaka (located about 93 miles southwest of Kampala bordering Lake Victoria), machete-wielding men killed at least 29 people and injured 14 others in their homes. Officials blamed the act on ethnic tensions, ISIS-DRC, and opposition lawmakers, and arrested at least 78 people — including two opposition lawmakers — but had not conclusively solved the case by the end of 2021; the motive for the killings is unclear.
- On August 27, security forces stopped an attempted suicide bombing at the funeral procession of former Deputy Inspector General of Police Paul Lokech. Ugandan media and authorities attributed the attempt to ISIS-DRC.
- On October 23, three individuals hid a bomb at a restaurant in the suburbs of Kampala, a venue known to attract members of the security services as patrons. When the bomb detonated, it killed one person and injured several others. Police later attributed the attack to ISIS-DRC.
- On November 16, IEDs were detonated in two locations in downtown Kampala near the central police station and the Ugandan parliament building, killing those who were transporting them. Two Uganda Police Force (UPF) personnel and two passers-by also died as a result of the explosions; 27 police and nine other individuals sustained injuries requiring hospitalization. The UPF attributed the bombings to the ADF and an ISIS linked social media channel seemed to confirm this assessment by claiming responsibility for the attacks.

Legislation, Law Enforcement, and Border Security: Despite its strong military capabilities relative to other countries in the region, Uganda remains vulnerable to terrorism. The vulnerability is at least in part due to porous borders, corruption, a lack of trust and information sharing among disparate security services, diversion of security force capabilities to focus on opposition politicians, an overly militarized approach to combating violent extremism within Uganda, and the security forces' poor relations with local communities and civil society.

Ugandan law enforcement has been accused of torturing Muslims it accuses of affiliation with the ADF. Lawyers defending accused terrorists (even those likely to be innocent) say they fear government harassment as well as reputational risk and possible loss of business for representing such clients.

Countering the Financing of Terrorism: Uganda is a member of the ESAAMLG, and Uganda's financial intelligence unit is known as the Financial Intelligence Authority (FIA); it is a member of the Egmont Group. Uganda's few large banks largely comply with international standards for anti-money laundering and countering financing of terrorism (AML/CFT), but most smaller banks do not have the capacity or technology to fully comply with international and national standards. In June, the Bank of Uganda began regulating mobile money transactions in line with successful passage of the 2020 National Payment Systems Act, which added mobile money financial transactions to the financial system's regulatory framework.

The FIA historically was a capable and willing partner, but it lacks the high-level political will to effectively regulate the financial sector. Additionally, the FIA's reputation remains severely damaged after it froze the accounts of respected NGOs working in the democracy and governance space that receive funding from the United States and other donors for political reasons preceding the January presidential elections. FATF placed Uganda on its gray list in 2020 based on shortcomings in Uganda's efforts to tackle AML/CFT. Uganda made a high-level political commitment to work with FATF and ESAAMLG to strengthen its AML/CFT regime and planned to implement FATF's recommendations by midyear 2022.

Countering Violent Extremism: As of December, Uganda had still not approved its draft national strategy to counter violent extremism. Additionally, any progress previously made in improving community policing has likely been lost because of multiple violent crackdowns by security services in the lead up to and aftermath of the January elections and confirmed and alleged terror attacks throughout the year. Violence and reported prolonged and unexplained detention at the hands of law enforcement are some of the major "push factors" of violent extremism in Uganda, reinforcing a key narrative employed by violent extremist recruiters to radicalize youths to violence.

International and Regional CT Cooperation: In December, the UPDF deployed 2,500 troops in a joint military operation with FARDC designated "Shujaa" to combat ISIS-DRC in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. Uganda continued to be the largest troop contributing country to AMISOM in 2021, with close to 6,000 personnel, and was responsible for the region in Somalia that suffers the largest number of al-Shabaab attacks, especially from IEDs.