

# Ugandans to the rescue



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## Uganda: Collective Punishment Cannot Deliver a Peaceful Karamoja

Kampala — There is no easy way out of the spiraling brutality that confronts the Karimojong civilians today. As darkness deepens over Karamoja, the NRM government continues with its brutal "disarmament programme," oblivious to the suffering of the Karimojong. Sadly enough, while this scenario continues, it is business as usual for Ugandans and the rest of the world.

According to available information from Karamoja, the UPDF soldiers are conducting a military campaign similar to that deployed in Acholi, Lango and Teso at the height of the NRA-LRA insurgency; burning of grain stores, arrest and torture of "suspected warriors" and opening fire on civilians among other instances of undisciplined havoc.

A Pokot chief elder Mzee Aramutori Lokodo, first brought the plight of the Karimojong to the public in February this year when his attempt to demonstrate at Parliament over alleged UPDF brutality was blocked by the police.

Then on April 29, 2010, Nicholas Abul, the Kacheri LCIII chairman, was quoted in the media as saying that a group of herdsman who were killed by the UPDF in Kerichi village, Kotido District "were unarmed and peacefully moving about with their cows". "The army should identify the warriors who are armed and those who are not. These people were not armed. I don't know why they were attacked."

During his tour of Karamoja, the Forum for Democratic Change President, Dr Kizza Besigye, saw what was happening there and accused the UPDF of "gross human rights abuses in their disarmament programme. Besigye told journalists at the FDC party headquarters in Najjanankumbi upon his return that the "abuses take the form of torture, beatings, and indiscriminate gunning of suspected rustlers."

In a paid-for-advert in The New Vision newspaper of May 24, 2010, the Uganda Human Rights Commission said several Kotido district residents were panic-stricken over the UPDF's alleged involvement in extra-judicial killings and torture of civilians. "(Our) investigations are still ongoing, but preliminary findings confirm that a number of people, including children and the elderly, were killed in various (cordon-and-search) operations carried out by the UPDF in Kotido between January and April, 2010," the statement signed by UHRC chairman Med Kagawa read in part.

Later, following a closed door meeting with UHRC on June 28, the visiting Irish Foreign Affairs minister Michael Martin said human rights violations in Karamoja were becoming the international community uneasy.

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"We are concerned about reports on human rights violation against women and children in Karamoja," Martin said, adding: "We have been assured by the commission that it is investigating extra-judicial killings by Ugandan military in Karamoja."

So when Pokot MP Francis Kiyonga accuses the Elite Special Forces unit of the UPDF for the killing of a dozen "innocent Pokot people" in Kosiroi and Loroo in Amudat District, one would expect that the government would commit itself to investigate the accusations, instead of an outright dismissal.

Kiyonga also accused the UPDF of scalding suspected Karimojong rustlers with hot metals; plucking out their teeth and slaughtering cows confiscated as exhibits during the disarmament operations.

The army spokesman, Lt. Col. Felix Kulayigye, dismissed the allegations as "unfounded" and described MP Kiyonga as "a liar and former rustler, a rustlers' sympathiser and collaborator".

On removing people's teeth as a method of torture, Kulayigye said: "Karimojong people have removed their teeth culturally."

Even before the current allegations surfaced, another MP had written to President Museveni and the Commander-in-Chief about the army's conduct. Jie County MP Peter Lokii in a dossier told President Museveni that soldiers killed anywhere between 28-43 civilians during an April 24 raid in Lokitelangilam in Rengen Sub-county to recover animals the Jie had allegedly raided from the Dodoth in Kaabong.

The president dismissed the allegations as "baseless" and that the army was "doing a good job in ridding Karamoja of guns."

So such is the tragic situation that has been playing itself in the Karamoja sub-region of North-eastern Uganda since the government launched the "disarmament programme".

The practice of drawing civilians into the fray of military "operations" is the UPDF's long standing tradition. They know that not all Karimojong carry guns. Neither are all Karimojong cattle rustlers, yet they are targeted as if they were.

This is not to suggest that the Karimojong warriors who terrorise their communities and neighbouring districts should not be held accountable. They must be. But is killing innocent civilians the best way to disarm the warriors?

The sheer scale of the disarmament exercise will become a military, ethical and human rights nightmare. Every day that the killings go on, raging emotions are building.

The clampdown and harshness of the "disarmament" campaign means that civilians are not separated from warriors. To the UPDF they are all the same, all "Karimojong are

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warriors." It is similar to the dreadful approach in Acholi sub-region twenty years ago: "All Acholi are rebels"!

Strangely enough, this is the only region in northern Uganda which has in all elections given Museveni 98% of their votes.

Common sense has to prevail, the Karimojong warriors must be separated from the ordinary civilians.

If Museveni believes that he is going to rid Karamoja of guns by force, he has not learnt anything from the 25 years of the insurgency in Acholi. And when the UPDF continues to target women and children, it shows that they are oblivious to the hatred, pain and suffering they are sowing.

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