

Ugandans say: Bring the troops home

by Linda de Hoyos

The Ugandan Parliament now has before it a motion to compel all Ugandan forces to leave the Democratic Republic of the Congo (D.R.C.). The motion had been put forward in early September, but was withdrawn pending the speech by President Yoweri Museveni to Parliament on Sept. 16 to explain Uganda's mission in Congo. Museveni's explanation was not satisfactory, the motion's sponsors said.

The Members of Parliament said that given the fact that Congo President Laurent Kabila had termed President Museveni as an "aggressor" in the Congo war of 1998, any agreement signed between the Presidents heretofore which permitted Ugandan forces in Congo for security reasons, had been unilaterally abrogated.

The MPs also argued that the military intervention into Congo by Zimbabwe, Angola, and Namibia, has "stabilized President Kabila's hold on power in the D.R.C. and has equally changed the geopolitical diplomatic and security scenario in the Great Lakes region." They said it was further "amazing," that despite the "involuntary security deployment" into Congo, the Allied Democratic Forces insurgency, which Museveni claims operates from bases inside Congo with aid from Sudan, was still able to mount raids in western Uganda, with apparent impunity.

The motion reflects agitation against Museveni's long-standing military adventures throughout Uganda, where the standard of living for most has steadily declined since Museveni came to power in 1986, and where hundreds of thousands are being displaced in northern and western Uganda, due to rebel insurgencies.

As opposition leaders, such as Paul Ssemogerere, chairman of the Democratic Party, and Cecilia Ogwal, chairman of the Ugandan Peoples Congress Interim Council, have said consistently: The Ugandan people are the losers in the use of Uganda by Western powers as the warlord for the Great Lakes region. It is a common belief throughout Uganda, that the reason why the Ugandan military is so ineffective in dealing with insurgencies within the country, is that the insurgencies provide a convenient pretext for Museveni to carry out his regional ambitions, in the name of security—regional ambitions that also coincide with the geopolitical demands coming from London and channels in Washington.

While sending troops into Congo and Sudan, Museveni has refused to consider options for negotiations with the insurgents. In the case of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in

northern Uganda, Museveni has been promising for 12 years to end the war militarily—without success. Yet, 12 years of war have resulted in the displacement of more than half a million people in northern Uganda into "protected villages," where they lack food, water, and sanitation, and more than 10,000 children from the war districts have been abducted in LRA "recruitment" drives. Rather than negotiate, Museveni has chosen again to invade Sudan, where the LRA receives safe haven. But even here, the military venture is only to aid John Garang's Sudanese People's Liberation Army; there is no engagement with the LRA. This raises the question: On whose behalf are Uganda's troops really deployed?

Powers should rein in Museveni

Ssemogerere on Sept. 17 called upon the international community to restrain Museveni from any further military aggression outside Uganda. He warned that continued Ugandan military activity against the Congo could spark a full war between Congo and its allies, on one hand, and Uganda. He said, "President Museveni's argument that he is intervening in the D.R.C. to prevent genocide is not sustainable and is not supported by historical evidence," referring to arguments in Museveni's speech to Parliament.

"Ever since our military involvement in Rwanda" in 1990-94, said Ssemogerere (a former Foreign Minister under Museveni), "a state of considerable insecurity now persists in Uganda on account of actual contemplated military action against Uganda by armed Rwandese rebels who blame us for their plight. Genocide in Rwanda was to a large measure prompted by Habyarimana's government's outrage and protest at a Uganda-backed Tutsi invasion. A similar scenario can be envisaged in the D.R.C."

Museveni had on Sept. 16 plunged the Parliament into uproarious laughter when he told his version of the Ugandan invasion of Rwanda in 1990: "You remember 4,000 young Rwandese who had been part of our army. Again, contrary to my advice, because I had tried to advise them not to go into Rwanda to fight, escaped and attacked the late Habyarimana. They escaped. I repeat, escaped."

Ssemogerere said that his party wants a full withdrawal from Congo, and also a policy of negotiating with the insurgencies inside Uganda. Also, in recent weeks, numbers of people, many of them Muslims and also the former vice secretary of the Democratic Party, have been summarily arrested in Uganda, under the guise of alleged connections to the insurgents, which are now considered "terrorists" by the Museveni government. Ssemogerere protested this policy, saying, "People are arrested without proper authority, they are not prosecuted, and are taken to places that are not gazetted."

In summary, Ssemogerere said: "Uganda has never been appointed by the international community to police others. Objectives such as national security which President Museveni has given for what amounts to military aggression by Uganda, cannot be achieved through military adventure."