

Africa's New Mobuttu

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Washington and London turn blind eyes to Museveni's transgressions

Uganda's Yoweri K. Museveni seems determined to push the East African country to utter lawlessness and bloodshed—perhaps as a ploy to declare Martial law and hold on.

The rapid decline started after he steam rolled the Constitution (which previously barred more than two terms) and contested last year's disputed elections which the opposition FDC party's Dr. Kizza Besigye claims Museveni stole. In spite of government intimidation, the High Court only narrowly ruled 4-3 against Besigye's petition to have the elections annulled.

Museveni inexplicably remains a darling of Washington and London notwithstanding grave transgressions within Uganda, and regionally. Both capitals are promoting Museveni's self-serving bid to donate 1,500

soldiers to a Somalia peace keeping operation: Charity must begin at home—two million Ugandans remain in concentration camps because the government has failed to end a 20 year civil war with the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).

What's more, the World Court ruled in favor of Democratic Republic of Congo after the Kinshasa government accused Uganda of war crimes -- pillage of property and resources, destructions, rapes, and massacres -- when its army occupied eastern Congo. The Court ordered Uganda to pay \$10 billion to the Kinshasa government—Washington and London know this.

So Uganda contributing troops to Somalia is tantamount to the Mafia guarding a bank's vaults—the United Nations and the African Union should dismiss this nonsense. It's purely a desperate PR maneuver by a regime facing difficulties from multiple frontlines.

Moreover, more legal trouble for Museveni could come from the International Criminal Court (ICC)—the same court which returned crimes against humanity indictments against Joseph Kony, leader of the Lord's Resistance Army and his senior lieutenants. The Wall Street Journal last year reported that the ICC has opened a separate investigation of alleged Congo war crimes abuses by the Ugandan political and military leadership: the complaint was filed again by the Kinshasa government, and, presumably indictments could be forthcoming. Why the rush to rehabilitation before the process run its course?

However, the clearest evidence that Uganda no longer even adheres to pretense of rule of law is the treatment of 11 detainees who had been arrested with Dr. Besigye in 2005, a few months before the Presidential elections. They were accused of membership in an anti-government movement, the People's Redemption Army (PRA) whose very existence many Ugandans question. Accusations of raping a young woman was also tacked against Dr. Besigye, for good measure.

Most Ugandans laughed off the charges for what they were—a ludicrous ploy by a desperate regime afraid of electoral defeat. On November 16, 2005, the High Court ordered all suspects freed. The government, anticipating such a move, sent armed hooded thugs in army uniform, so-called Black Mambas, to storm the court and cower judges and the general public.

Whereupon, all suspects except Dr. Besigye were thrown back into prison. Dr. Besigye went on to contest the elections, which many of his supporters believe he won. Meanwhile the 11 co-accused have remained behind bars. This month Uganda's Constitutional Court ruled that the men were "illegal detainees."

How does the government respond? Just today, a High Court Judge, Eldad Mwangusya, reportedly ordered all 11 of the co-accused, who had sought release, back to prison until March 1. The judge didn't explain from whence he derived or based the authority or whether the November 2005 bail was still effective.

"It is a shame to this court," Dr. Besigye himself declared outside the court today. "The chief justice should come out and tell the public that he, together with his judges, can no longer exercise the powers that were entrusted to them by the people of Uganda."

So, how does the international community respond? Uganda is still scheduled to host the Commonwealth Heads of Government Conference in Kampala come November 2007—surely everything is upside down.

Recall that Zimbabwe was suspended from the Commonwealth for alleged anti-democratic practices – unless the real reason was the Mugabe government's land redistribution from the white elite to Africans? What's the excuse for Uganda's own Commonwealth membership, let alone the prestige of hosting the annual summit?

Meanwhile, on-and-off negotiations to end 20 years of civil war that has ravaged especially northern Uganda are off again. Talks have been held in Juba, capital of Southern Sudan, since last summer. Without major international participants and observers, both government and the LRA have little urgency to conclude a comprehensive Treaty.

So, two million Ugandans remain confined to squalid concentration camps – euphemistically referred to as "Internally Displaced People's" camps –set up by the Museveni regime. The UN reports that more than 1,000 civilians die each week in these camps, amounting to a slow-motion genocide. More civilians have perished in the camps

– “protected” to death by government soldiers – than have been killed in all the 20 years of the LRA’s terror campaigns.

Yet this cataclysm hasn’t been embraced by international media –because it doesn’t pit the victims against a “bad guy” similar to Sudan’s Muslim President Omar Bashir – although it’s right across the border from Darfur’s killing fields. When CNN’s Anderson Cooper did a special broadcast focusing on Darfur a few months ago, he and crew members had to have flown over Uganda’s death camps.

There is no logic or justification for Washington and London to continue embracing Museveni, much like these capitals once sustained Mobutu in Zaire. Millions of Ugandans and East Africans deserve better. Museveni’s argument that he helped oust Idi Amin and Milton Obote is no longer valid currency for today’s woes.