
August 02, 2012

US Military Involvement in Uganda Yields Mixed Results

by Hillary Heuler

KAMPALA — U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton will be in Uganda Friday to talk with President Yoweri Museveni about regional security and American-Ugandan military cooperation. Hillary Heuler reports from Kampala.

The U.S. State Department describes Uganda as a "key U.S. partner," particularly in the fight against the rebel Lord's Resistance Army and in Somalia.

Fighting al-Shabab

Ugandan troops make up the bulk of the African Union peacekeeping force in Somalia, AMISOM - conducting operations against the militant Islamist group, al-Shabab. The United States pulled its own troops out of Somalia in 1993 after 18 American soldiers were killed. But U.S. Embassy spokesman Dan Travis in Kampala says America has been helping finance the Ugandan operation in Somalia for years.

"We've supported that effort since 2007, by providing funding for training, equipment, transportation and to sustain Ugandan and Burundian forces serving with AMISOM [the U.N. peacekeeping force in Somalia]," he said.

US military involvement

American military involvement in the region dates back much longer than that. During the Clinton administration, the African Crisis Response Initiative was set up to train the militaries of certain African countries, including Uganda. And, more recently, the United States has provided logistical support and military trainers in Uganda's war against Joseph Kony and his rebel Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).

Travis says military cooperation between the two countries has been beneficial to both.

"Uganda is one of America's key partners in Africa and has established itself as a leader advancing efforts to resolve conflicts throughout the region," he said. "Countering violent extremism, especially organizations like the Lord's Resistance Army or al-Shabab, is vital to a stable, secure and prosperous future for Uganda as well as the African continent."

Lord's Resistance Army

The LRA terrorized northern Uganda for two decades and has now moved into neighboring countries. But according to Paul Omach, professor of security studies at Kampala's Makerere University, defeating the LRA - which is estimated to be several hundred militants strong - is not the main reason why the United States is involved. Omach says the Islamist government of Sudan has been accused of supporting the LRA, which makes Joseph Kony and the LRA part of the global war on terror.

"Kony is a proxy in a bigger war," said Omach. "The bigger war is with international terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism and all that. And, for a long time, accusing fingers had been pointed at Sudan. That accusation still keeps on coming up."

Museveni - a valuable partner

Omach says one of the main reasons the United States has chosen Uganda as a military ally is because of Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni. The professor says his personal control over the army, as well as his willingness to use his soldiers, make him a valuable partner.

"Museveni is one who is ready," he said. "He looks at himself as a revolutionary. He has actually said these things - 'We are revolutionary, we are going to change the region.' He takes the risk. But you see, he also doesn't have these democratic encumbrances when the body bags start coming."

Ugandans are taking note of the losses. In 2010, Somali suicide bombers killed 74 people in Kampala watching a broadcast of the final match of the soccer World Cup. Al-Shabab claimed the attack was retaliation for Uganda's involvement in Somalia.

Popular reluctance

For many Ugandans, the war in Somalia has not been worth the cost.

"I think it's hurting Uganda," says a woman in Kampala. "Al-Shabab has tried to hit us so many times. They hit us after the World Cup, about 80 people died. Why should we have so many of our soldiers out in Somalia? I really don't see what we are gaining from that war."

Omach says U.S. military assistance has strengthened the Ugandan army, making it more capable of defending the country. But, he adds, such capacity building has an opposite side as well.

"The paradox of external military assistance in authoritarian states is that it ends up supporting authoritarianism, either intentionally or unintentionally," he said. "The countries with military means at hand will always use military means to resolve political disputes, even at home. So that is possibly one of the unfortunate impacts of the U.S. military involvement. I think it has given the government and Museveni's leadership a lease on life."

Ugandans may prefer to focus on domestic issues, but the hunt for Kony continues and al-Shabab - though weakened - remains a threat in this part of Africa. Hillary Clinton's decision to visit Uganda is being seen as a sign that the United States intends to stay involved in this volatile region for the foreseeable future.