

Col. Nathan Mugisha

Commander, 4th Division, UPDF

Interview Date: June 2005

Interviewer: George Otis, Jr.

Location: 4th Division HQ, Gulu

George Otis

Can you give us a very general overview of this conflict over the last 15 years, from your perspective as a division commander.

Col. Nathan Mugisha

This conflict has been going on since August, 1986.

Immediately this government had set in, the former forces ran across Sudan. They were reorganized. Remember, this government come in place January, 1986. On August 26, there was an attack on Bebeer (SP?). The former forces reorganized and launched an attack on Bebeer and Kitgum which failed. Thereafter, the gorilla war ensued, which also failed, because the ultimate aim was to capture Gulu.

Thereafter, by 1988, we see the then UPDA, UPM, UPDM striking or brokering a peace agreement between Uganda government and UPDA, which was signed in Pece Stadium right here in a negotiated settlement. Over 2,000 of UPDM members and UPDM joined the government. This is demonstrated by Col. Achora who is the LC 5 now. Some political leaders like Ali who is also with the government. And most of the people who had military background came out of the bush.

A few of the members who were not satisfied with the agreement, and because of the other influences, chose to continue fighting the government.

And we see Alice Lakwena coming in – this lady who was backed by these, according to her, spiritual powers, starting the rebellion, and mobilizing most of the peasants, and took them all the way to the East where he was. She failed and run to Kenya where she is still in exile.

Thereafter, we see her father, Lukoya, who took over from her and also failed.

Then we see a relative coming up in the name of Kony. Kony took over the reigns also under the same banner of the spiritual powers. In other

words, they bear their powers through witchcraft and mixed up with the religion. So, I could say it's a failed Western religion with the African religion. So the combination of two is the driving power that has sustained this conflict.

George Otis

Over the last several years you have been serving up here, I'm sure you have seen some absolutely horrific atrocities. Having seen all of that, what is your opinion of this man, Joseph Kony? How would you describe him?

Col. Nathan Mugisha

In the first place, Joseph Kony, in his childhood, went mad. He went berserk. Thereafter, he disappeared on a certain hill near his village and he came back to claim he had possessed some spiritual powers and he could heal some ailments. After performing those powers for some time, he claimed he had got a dream of liberation. The spiritual powers had told him he could liberate his fellow Acholi and eventually the whole country when the so-called Ten Commandments of his kind. He started mobilizing his fellow countryman by force, by abduction – not by conviction.

George Otis

Do you know of any other army in recent history that has been fighting an opponent like the LRA? Or, do you think this is unique in modern history?

Col. Nathan Mugisha

I think, as far as I can remember, this is the only one I know of apart from those other, the one like Maji Maji in Tanzania, which aimed at demystifying the gun, the bullets – that if you have smeared with water then the bullets would not enter your body. It never worked. Likewise, it never worked here. It was smeared with oil. They cut pebbles of stone, which they tie and put by their clothes. All this doesn't work.

George Otis

Were you present in 2003 when Pastor Julius Oyet was meeting with the President and some of the military commanders here? And if you were, what was your memory of that meeting?

Col. Nathan Mugisha

I was not around by then, but I have witnessed Pastor Oyet's works. He's been going around demystifying the spiritual powers. Actually, the spiritual powers are no longer with Kony. So I can say Kony is the mad fella' he used to be in his childhood. He's continued to deceive his fellow countrymen that he has some powers. But he used the normal intelligence to deceive the people of what information he has really got.

George Otis

Over the course of the last 24 or 25 months, how would you characterize the positive direction in the conflict against the LRA? From before Operation Iron Fist until now, what has happened? What has changed? And do you think things are better now?

Col. Nathan Mugisha

The LRA has reduced tremendously. Before Operation Iron Fist, the LRA had bases externally in Sudan. This conflict gained external linkage in 1994, after the failed peace initiative through Betty Bigombe. In 1994, the LRA gained external linkage by moving to Sudan. And they started having bases, and abducting, and going. That was the cycle.

By the time the Iron Fist Operation was launched, LRA was estimated at 5,000 personnel with 3,000 armed. But, as I speak, all that is no longer. We are talking of hundreds. Actually, we are talking of less than 400 armed, and a few others unarmed. And we have an average of about four either reporting or being killed per day so far. So that trend – it cannot be sustained.

George Otis

In your judgment, then, is this conflict now winding down to the end?

Col. Nathan Mugisha

Actually, the war or the conflict is coming to an end, as illustrated by what you saw on the ground. Yesterday, you had the opportunity to head across country – drive up to Nimule. I hope you saw by yourself the way people are leading or are conducting their businesses on their own without fear. They are able to move to town, they are able to go to their gardens, and they are able to do their business. Yes.

George Otis

When these rebels are captured, or they surrender, or turn themselves in, how are they treated by the UPDF and by their fellow countrymen here?

Col. Nathan Mugisha

Actually, initially we had a big problem from the community. We had to sensitize them, so whether they surrender by themselves or we capture them at the war front we treat them the same. We welcome them home like you saw.

You have just seen Brigadier Banyar. We captured him and we brought him home. We don't have prisoners of war. We just bring them home and welcome them to interact with the old colleagues who have come much earlier.

And, thereafter, we take them for skills training, like you have just visited Labora training. This is aimed at equipping them with some skills before they get integrated in the community. Because the question is: They have come back home. So what? What are we doing? How will they live?

They need to have hope, and they need to leave the culture of living by the gun. They need to start being educated and being acclimatized to society of rule of law. And that is a big problem. So right now they are formed in sort of a cooperative union. And under that arrangement they are able to access loans. They are able to do what you have just seen. Actually, they have over 400 acres of cultivation. And there are several other schools which have been coming up to empower especially the children. Because this is for the adult. The children are compelled to go to school to make sure they gain the elementary education. And they should be able to lead a normal life like any other citizens.

George Otis

As you know, there have been all kinds of media reports over the last couple of years by various news agencies talking about this conflict. It seems some of it has been poorly informed. Do you believe right now that the military situation up here is stabilized and that life is returning to normal? Are you convinced this is a place where people can invest and can begin now to return to life as normal?

Col. Nathan Mugisha

Actually, the situation is improving. People have left town. They have gone back to the places nearest their homes.

We used to have bigger camps like Pabbo where you pass yesterday, having about 60,000 people. Those camps have been decongested with time, and we are continuing that process.

We equip them with a package of security component. And that package is to make sure they can be able to sustain their security wherever they go nearest their homes.

You may have observed those decongestion go six kilometers apart.

This gives them more opportunity to access more land for production.

And this has gone a long way to improve sanitation. Therefore we have reduced the risk of outbreaks of epidemics.

We have also increased on the security aspect, because the people live in their communities as they used to under their own leadership. So they know themselves. They are able to promote their traditions and culture.

And, therefore, they are able to leave the confusion of a big settlement where the people are practicing all sorts of immoralities and bad cultures which come up in the big society.

George Otis

Do you see a role for some of the Christian churches in the area in helping to counter some of the superstition that maybe gave the LRA an opportunity to do what they did?

Col. Nathan Mugisha

Apparently, the most prominent has been Pastor Oyet who has come up to condemn – to demystify – some of those myths.

But, on a larger scale, the church has not been very active, unfortunately. This explains why this problem has taken this long.

Initially, I told you this is a failure of the Western religion and the contradiction between a strong tradition. Actually, what I have observed on the ground, Pastor Oyet has done more job than any other of the religions we have had. Most of them have been playing, I could say, a sit-and-watch kind of attitude.

George Otis

Just a follow-up question on that, because I'm quite familiar with that. Pastor Oyet actually was one member of a very large coalition of churches that were meeting in Kampala. I know even the First Lady was involved in it. And he was quite involved up here because he's an Acholi. But he was really the tip of the spear that involved many churches.

My question is: are you saying that from about that time of the rallies and the destruction of some of the altars that Kony was visiting back around early 2003, that you have seen some positive change from that time?

Col. Nathan Mugisha

Oh, yes. We used to have problems, especially in the dry season – fires... outbreaks in the camps – mainly because of the congestion and mishandling of fire by children. But some people were claiming some kind of spiritual powers causing all this.

But once that team led by Pastor Oyet came, it helped in demystifying all these kind of myths. So that's why I say Pastor Oyet and his team did a commendable job in helping the society to come back to light.

George Otis

What was your role in Operation Iron Fist, and how would you describe the effectiveness of that campaign? To the extent that you're able, could

you describe how it was launched, roughly how many men were involved, and where you went.

Col. Nathan Mugisha

Apparently, when Iron Fist Operation was launched I was not around. I had gone on course. But I was monitoring, because I was in the neighboring state, Kenya. But Operation Iron Fist was launched with main bases – four division forming the nucleus of the force that went across. It was an infantry supported by armor and other auxiliary forces, like artillery and other support forces.

George Otis

Tell us exactly what you were looking for in the different types of incursions into Sudan.

Col. Nathan Mugisha

We are looking for bases of LRA in southern Sudan, which we had clear intelligence about. The general area that is along Kit Valley. That's where they were lined up. We crushed all of them. Captured a lot of arms, which we gave to the Sudan forces to illustrate to them that this is the harm they had been doing. And if you want more information of the details what was captured – it is on record.

George Otis

When you are going out on raids against the LRA, one of the difficulties you have been facing as a military force is that many of these fighters are children who have been abducted by their own countrymen. Their parents are understandably nervous about having their own children killed. How have you managed to fight a war where you have had to wear gloves all the time?

Col. Nathan Mugisha

First of all, we know the pattern and the tactics the LRA use. And we know our ultimate goal is to release or to rescue those who are in abduction who are normally kept in the center – especially before they are trained.

So when we approach a certain group we know how to fire with the view that we do not inflict casualties. Of course, in the field there might be some unavoidable kind of casualties.

But we have that in the background and is accounted for. That's why in most cases we are able to rescue the people who have been an abduction. So far, over 15,000 children and women have been rescued, and we have minimized the rate of abduction. Actually, the abduction is almost at zero.

That's because we have studied and known how these people have been doing the activities.

George Otis

That's excellent. I have all kinds of questions running through my mind right now that I would love to ask you. But I really want to respect your time today.

Just before I let you go, is there anything else you would really like to say that you think is important for people to understand about what's going on up here in Northern Uganda today?

Col. Nathan Mugisha

What is very important is that people should know there is still the element of collaboration. The element of collaboration is our major challenge – to remove that small percentage. Over 90% hearts and minds have been won on our side. But there is still this small percentage – maybe about 3% – which we need to win over. That remains the challenge.

We also like to appeal to the international community to maintain pressure on the parties in the Sudan to make sure they abide and respect and implement the negotiated agreement, so that there could be peace in southern Sudan.

Actually, this so-called insurgency is based on issues. Therefore, if we do not have peace in southern Sudan it has an automatic kind of implication that this problem here in the North may take slightly longer than it would have otherwise taken.

George Otis

Yesterday, you and I were talking about how relatively easy it might be for you to capture and bring to justice Joseph Kony. Why is that difficult for the UPDF at this time? If you can't answer this question directly, just let me know.

Col. Nathan Mugisha

Kony, the way he behaves, the way he operates – he has become hardened. Every other day he has developed survival instincts. For example, he used to use radio for communication. He no longer does so. He communicates through other stations.

Every other day he's trying to learn how to dodge. And he lives with a very small group, which cannot easily be monitored.

However, the chances of his survival are getting slimmer and slimmer. But he also lives between the southern part of Sudan, which has the

bigger room for maneuver. And the terrain is a bit difficult. So we hope with time and the cooperation of the southern Sudan government we will be able to catch up with him and bring him to justice.

George Otis

So, you're not concerned that he might find protection from the authorities in northern Sudan?

Col. Nathan Mugisha

So far, we are not sure. But as far as they are telling us, and the facts we have on the ground, they cut off every supply. But how this can be sustained is what I cannot commit.

George Otis

And, just to be clear here, you would like the international community – including the G-8, including the United Nations, and all of the other organizations – to continue to put pressure on anyone in the area who is sustaining or encouraging this war to continue?

Col. Nathan Mugisha

That is my humble appeal. But the major issue is to see the peace agreement between the SPLA and the Sudan government to be implemented. This is a very crucial stage, which requires the international community to support the two parties to implement that agreement. Short of that, we shall go back to square one. We will not have solved anything and, therefore, LRA will still be relevant. I hope you understand me.

George Otis

The generous terms the government of Uganda has extended to these rebels are almost unbelievable. Is there any concern you have in the extension of these generous terms that justice on an individual level will not be served?

Col. Nathan Mugisha

Well, amnesty so far covers a good percentage of all. But there is overwhelming evidence on those who have been commanding, guiding, and committing all these heinous atrocities against innocent people and who continue to now. The International Criminal Court of Justice has gathered enough evidence. I think justice will be done at one time. I don't know how to recommend as to who it should apply to. But the international community has an obligation.

George Otis

Just so I understand you, I think what you're saying is that the Ugandan government has drawn a line between many of the middle level

commanders and foot soldiers of the LRA, and top leaders like Vincent Otti and Joseph Kony. Would the Ugandan government support the international community in bringing individuals at that senior leadership to justice?

Col. Nathan Mugisha

Actually, it's the policy of government that the international community supports the International Criminal Court to bring to bear all the pressure onto the perpetrators of atrocities against humanity in this sub-region, be it LRA or any other party.

George Otis

Very good. Outstanding. Thank you, sir.

End of interview.