

# JANE'S DEFENCE WEEKLY

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## Front cover

A Canadian Armed Forces CF-18 Hornet is displayed at the Paris Air Show this week. But Canada has ended its NATO commitment to send two squadrons of CF-18s to Norway in times of tension. See P1163



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# Rebels of Uganda

By Fausto Biloslavo

S NOW over five years since Uganda's leader Yoweri Museveni led his National Resistance Army (NRA) out of the bush and the streets of Kampala. Winston Churchill called Uganda the 'Heart of Africa', but since then atrocities committed by a succession of leaders on a restless and divided population have tarnished the country's image. Whenever a different faction came to power, it favoured its own tribesmen. The NRA army has long been dominated by the northern Acholi and Lango tribes; they fought against Idi Amin in 1979 and against Museveni's guerrillas too. According to US intelligence reports they were responsible, between 1980 and 1985, for the deaths of at least 100 000 people. These were mostly civilians and the killings took place in the so-called Lowero triangle. Museveni insisted that the skulls and bones were taken up from the mass graves should be done so as to remind people of what came before he took power. "Ours was a people's war, yours is a tribal war," said Uganda's president during the latest anniversary celebrations. "Our army will respect people's fundamental rights and defend the national interest without any tribal distinction."

By Fausto Biloslavo

Old habits die hard, and the NRA's attempt at re-absorbing the largely Acholi soldiers who fought for Gen Basilio Okello when he toppled Obote from power in 1985 have proved less than successful.

The 'reorganisation' camp at Kibarara is where the former soldiers of the Ugandan National Liberation Army (UNLA) learn the doctrine which forms the basis of the new Uganda.

"So far about 2000 ex-UNLA fighters have been absorbed into the NRA," said Fred Mwysege, who is in charge of the camp.

During the celebration parade, the army proudly displayed its latest weapons, belonging to the one (and only) artillery unit in the NRA which prides itself on having the entire country under its control. Museveni described the military situation as "excellent", particularly in the north.

The reality seems to be different: there is still unrest and fighting in at least half the country. In the Gulu-Lira-Kitgum triangle there is fighting between soldiers loyal to Okello, who are hiding in the bush, and government troops.

In the east, the fierce Karamojon

▲ A rebel patrol moves in the bush between Gulu and Paboo (80th Rebel Brigade)

tribesmen are still cattle-rustling on a large scale and are armed with automatic weapons.

There is also fighting on the Kenyan border, where rival tribes are still settling old scores.

In the west, the border with Zaire is also the scene of banditry, and there is considerable tension with Sudan, as both sides accuse each other of helping rebel groups.

The most significant rebel group is the Ugandan People's Democratic Army (UPDA), made up largely of former UNLA soldiers who were defeated by Museveni's army.

"The UPDA is a new army, founded in July last year, whose aim is to topple Museveni's repressive regime and set up a true coalition government."

So said Maj John Okello (no relation), commander of the 80th Brigade of the new army who granted *JDW* an interview at his HQ in the bush 20 km north of Gulu, the provincial capital of the Acholi region. According to Okello, a former officer in the UNLA, his brigade is 5000 strong.

"We are accountable to a divisional HQ



▲ Field gun, probably 76 mm, used by government soldiers during the battle of Corner Kilak

situated in the far north of the country," said Okello. "The HQ co-ordinates another six brigades, each comprising nine battalions. In this area we have links with the 115th Brigade and in one recent attack our combined forces killed at least 200 NRA soldiers," he added.

This previously unknown rebel army, reached for the first time by Western journalists, launched a big operation on the strategically vital Lira-Kitgum road which dissects the north of the country.

On 14 January, at least 3000 rebels repeatedly attacked and finally overran Corner Kilak, an important crossroad on the highway.

"They marched slowly towards us singing war chants," said Fred Rwigyema, second in command of the NRA.

Having won the day, the rebels unwisely

▼ Vice Chief-of-Staff of the NRA, Fred Rwigyema



decided to stay put, and four days later came under sustained attack from NRA forces who had moved up a mobile brigade from Lira and battle-hardened troops from the Karamoja region.

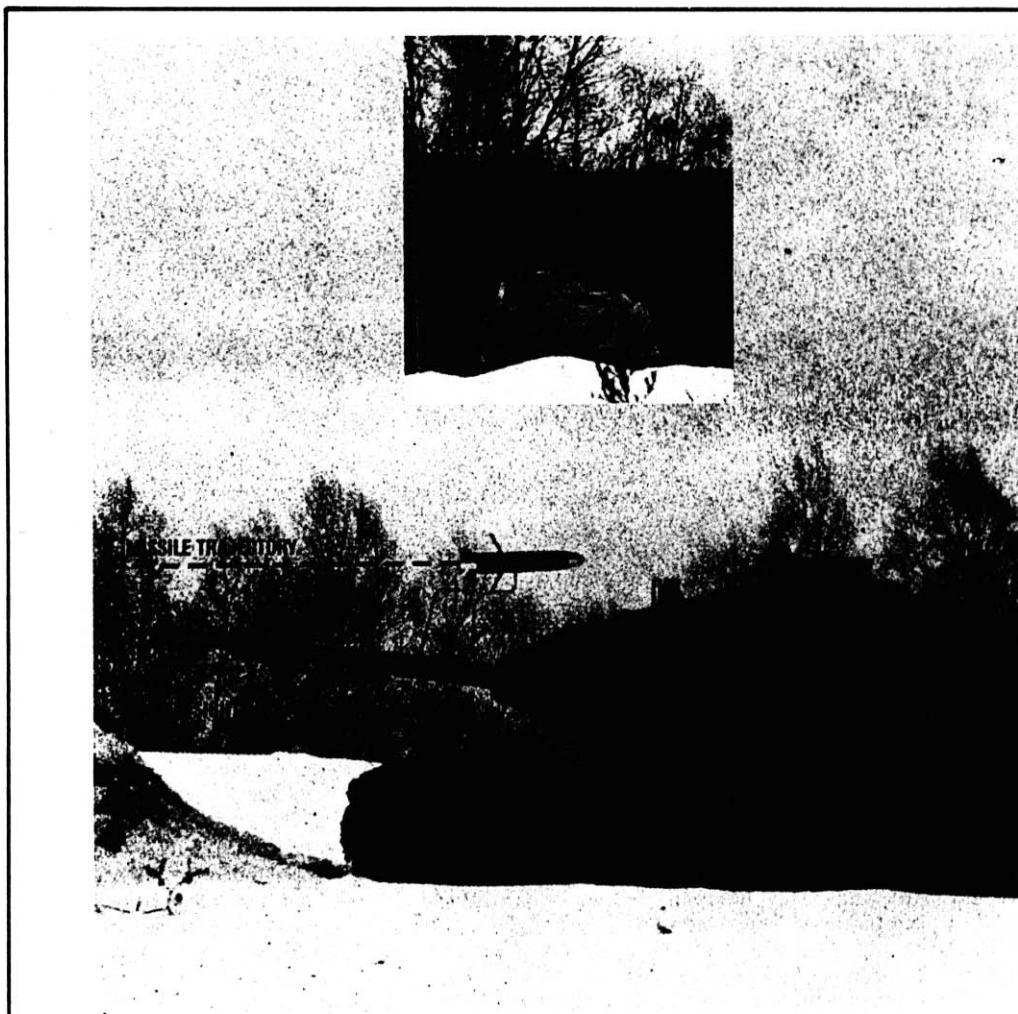
In the final move to recapture the post, the NRA even used anti-aircraft guns to blast rebel positions.

"We killed at least 350 rebels, including their leader Col Eric Odawar," said Cdr Sande, who four days before had fled the post. "We have captured 976 light weapons, 33 RPGs and two 82 mm mortars."

The government forces suffered 97 casualties, though some reports said more died and were buried at night.

Museveni plans to solve the northern turbulence firstly by granting a pardon to all those who have not been guilty of crimes against civilians, and secondly, on setting up 'protection camps' for civilians to be run by the NRA.

According to Father Giovanni Taneburgo, a missionary at Alokolum, near Gulu, the amnesty would not extend to officers in the rebel formations, and the protection camps would help concentrate people in determinate



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◀ UPDA (Ugandan People's Democratic Army) guerrillas with Sterling 9 mm, FN FAL 7.62 mm (Belgian made), AK 47 7.62 mm and Chinese grenade, about 20 km north-west of Gulu

areas, so as to isolate the guerrillas in the bush. It remains doubtful whether these measures would dent the structure of the UPDA.

The north of the country is not the only problem area for Museveni. There is trouble in Kampala too, where an openly Marxist faction within the National Resistance Movement is manoeuvring to take the country towards a less pro-Western stance, particularly anti-British.

Their influence is already felt in institutions like the special school for NRA members in Entebbe, where Marxist dictums appear in the students' textbooks.

Allied to this should be considered the substantial help given by Libya's Col Gaddafi which includes the gift of two Siai Marchetti 260 WL aircraft laden with light weapons and ammunition which regularly lands in Entebbe; and the military training of Ugandan officers in Libya.

In addition, the East Germans are



▲ NRA soldier with RPD 7.62 mm around Gulu



cealed tank becomes an open target. p of the hull is the Achilles' heel of a tank. The armour is relatively thin, there, llt to protect using active armour or other add-on devices. The obliquely /arhead can easily penetrate to reach ammunition and other critical spots hull.

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organising the secret services, the Yugoslavs provide some military assistance, and there are unconfirmed reports of Cuban military instructors.

The main Western supplier, at least in terms of hardware, is the Italian helicopter firm Agusta. Six new helicopters will be delivered shortly to increase the present force of one 206 Agusta Bell, one 206 Bell, two 412 Agusta Bell and one 212. Five more helicopters involved in the surrender of Kampala over a year ago were saved and pressed into service.

The battle in the north is taking its toll on the civilian population.

The government is daily accusing the 'bandits' of massacring civilians, while the NRA has closed a number of town markets because they fear that some of them have been aiding the rebels. The insurgents claim this will cause hunger and hardship as civilians will have to travel to approved markets to buy and sell their produce.

The army itself is embarking on an ambitious project to become self-sufficient as far as food is concerned. The idea is to set up five farms which will be run and worked by soldiers. Besides feeding the NRA, officials claim that there will be a \$40 million surplus per year.

Museveni is certainly capable of exercising a successful military solution in the north; it is rather the complicated infighting within the NRA and the choices he will have to make in an international context that will most probably cause him the greatest of problems.

Fausto Biloslavo's colleague Almerigo Grilz, co-founder of the Albatross Press Agency, has been killed while filming a RENAMO assault on a government-held town in Mozambique.

Grilz, aged 34, produced several articles for *JDW*, the last being a detailed account of the rebel factions in Ethiopia (*JDW* 25 April).