

Tourist murders expose Ugandan success claims

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19 March 1999

The murder of eight Western tourists at the Bwindi National Park, Uganda earlier this month has highlighted the growing instability of a country deemed an African "success story" by the United States and Europe. Far from resolving the problems of poverty, repression and the brutal atrocities that were associated with the regime of Idi Amin in the 1970s, Western "support" has resulted in a rapid deterioration of conditions.

Attacks and killings by various militias are a regular feature in the Ugandan press. In the west of Uganda, the rebel group called the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) were reported to have killed 22 civilians over the last month and have organised a recent spate of bomb attacks in the Ugandan capital, Kampala. In the north the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), which follows the religious cult leader Joseph Kony, conducts raids on villages from across the Sudan border. As well as killing and mutilating villagers, the UN and human rights groups have accused the LRA of abducting thousands of children and forcing them to take part in massacres.

On top of these long standing conflicts, the Rwandan Hutu militias--the Interahamwe--have stepped up their raids in the south west of Uganda, including the killings at Bwindi. This is the direct result of the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where Uganda and Rwanda, together with various opposition groupings, are now fighting the Kabila regime they had originally brought to power. Kabila is supported by forces from Zimbabwe and Namibia. The war has involved at least eight countries over the last nine months, devastating large parts of central Africa. The DRC regime has enlisted the support of the Interahamwe, the outfit responsible for leading the genocide of up to a million people in Rwanda in 1994.

Last month they attacked a village in southern Uganda, hacking five people to death.

Until now the Western media ignored this growing violence in Uganda, preferring to maintain the illusion of Africa's "rising star", as well as encouraging the lucrative tourist trade that had increased, as tourists avoided Kenya following the Nairobi bombing. According to the *Observer* newspaper, the family of another British tourist recently killed in the area was told by the Foreign Office "to keep quiet for fear of spreading the idea that Uganda was unstable". Press reports in Uganda were mainly concerned at the effect on the economy. The *Daily New Vision* said, "A number of people saw double standards in this response in comparison to massacres of locals. Forget about the sentiments, when it comes to tourists, the whole thing boils down to pure economics and the figures tell the story. This year, the Wild Life Authority hopes to raise sh1.6 bn [over \$1 million] from gorilla viewing alone."

Last year, Uganda was the first country to receive debt relief of \$30 million under the World Bank's Heavily Indebted Poor Country initiative. President Yoweri Museveni was the key figure in Bill Clinton's visit to Africa a year ago. Museveni runs Uganda through the National Resistance Movement, the only political party which is not banned, having seized power in 1986. He then abandoned his former pretensions to socialism and embraced the free market economy, implementing IMF structural adjustment programs. Over 2,500 expropriated properties were returned to their former owners and an extensive privatisation programme has attracted world investors.

The Ugandan army has played a central role in implementing pro-US and British policy in the region. It organised the forces that took over Rwanda after the genocide there in 1994. In 1997, together with the

Rwandan army, it successfully invaded the Democratic Republic of Congo (previously Zaire) and brought former guerrilla leader Laurent Kabila to power after the fall of Mobutu. To the north, Uganda has backed the Sudanese People's Liberation Army against the regime in Sudan, with covert support from the US.

These military operations have taken an increasing toll on the Ugandan economy and are giving rise to mounting opposition. Last year, the Ugandan regime increased its military spending by 26 percent--it was already consuming up to a fifth of national income. Oppositionist leader Paul Ssemogerere of the Democratic Party said that the Bwindi killings were the result of the government's "military adventurism" in the DRC. National Democratic Front leader Chapaa Karuhangasaid instability and unrest would continue in Uganda as long as it gave support to rebels fighting in neighbouring countries, "let us stop wars and find lasting solutions to poverty in the country."

Uganda's economy was growing at up to 7 percent a year and had become known as an African "tiger". Now it has fallen to 5.5 percent and aid donors--accounting for \$2 billion--are expressing concern at growing reports of corruption. Last month, Museveni ordered his brother, Major-General Salim Saleh--top commander in the Congo war--to repay a bank loan which was at the centre of a corruption scandal surrounding the privatisation of the Uganda Commercial Bank.

World Bank debt relief will make no improvement at all in the Ugandan economy, as the price of coffee, its main export, has collapsed. None of the economic development of the last few years has helped overcome the poverty of the vast bulk of the population. Uganda ranks at 160 out of the list of 174 on the United Nations Human Development Index. Average life expectancy is 40 and average per capita income about \$33 a week.



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