

Economic lessons from guerrilla attack on Masindi 42 years ago

On February 20, 1984, Gen Salim Saleh, then aged 24, led the National Resistance Army (NRA) guerrillas to attack Masindi and capture weapons, ammunition, and other supplies. The battle had by 9am reached my Kabalega Secondary School, just a kilometre from the barracks. My presumably safe watch of an ambush by government soldiers at the school gate was disrupted by a hoarse voice of, "lie down", just two metres away. The Rocket Propelled Grenade that pierced the air above resulted in an explosion that could have caused diarrhoea had I taken the maggot-infested porridge that morning.

Decades later, I have engaged in development planning alongside the generals who executed that battle. I have asked questions on how the successes in planning and execution of military battles can be replicated in economic development processes. I got to learn that the deadly 14-mm anti-aircraft gun was simply destroyed as it did not synchronise with that phase of the war. I have learnt that vague assumptions are not part of planning for military battles. One must analyse all aspects of the different scenarios and map them to activities and possible outcomes of the battle.

I have noted that the process of military appreciation of problems is not the simple imaginative appraisal or feasibility analysis. Listening to a general, who was an Intelligence Officer (IO) for several battles, I concluded that the process is far more complex and detailed compared to what many economic planners do. While the later can, and often ignore vital aspects of the pathway to impact and there after attribute failure to lack of resources, termite and youth mindset, the IO has no margin of error. The conse-

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quences of military failure due to negligence of matters of insight and foresight are very grave. The IO must analyse the known and assumed facts to generate the best or better course of action in the given circumstance.

In Uganda, the multiplicity of interests from a myriad of stakeholders often complicates the development process to levels that require the military High Command. Statements like "rural electrification will increase manufacturing, value addition, household incomes and people in the money economy" are not for the IO. Increasing electricity coverage through transmission of power from large hydro power plants might be the anti-aircraft gun where solar panels are adequate for millions of households that sim-

ply need two bulbs and a socket to charge their phone! China is installing solar panels equivalent to 1GW per day (coverage for 1 million households) and has increased solar power from 0.1GW in 2010 to 1,063GW in 2025.

The "big gun" investment projects that are out of synch with the current realities tend to create budget deficits whose funding increases interest rates to the detriment of both the public and private sector. Servicing the public debt undermines development and maintenance of basic transport and energy infrastructure as well as provision of quality education and health services. Interest payment of Shs13,899.57 billion in 2026/27 will consume 33.5 percent of anticipated domestic revenues, with the ratio rising to 44.4 percent after adding external debt service and domestic arrears of Shs20 billion. The mismatch of plans and budget to the realities of the day has undermined the quality and value of the development process.

The lesson from the logic of leaving the big gun and taking about 760 small guns, years ago, is to keep the focus on vital small things at the bottom of the pyramid where 5.5 million youth, aged 18-30 years, are not in education, employment, or training. The government must restructure its institutions, plans and budgets to realign activities and long-term goals to what is feasible. A thousand kilometres of murrum road, better than five kilometres of costly tarmac. Hope is not a strategy.

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