Army link Apaa fights to farmland wrangles

Local leaders say the violence is being driven by criminal groups taking advantage of existing land tensions to loot property.

BY TEDDY DOKOTHO & SUSAN ACHOLA

The Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF) has attributed the latest wave of violence in Apaa Township, Amuru District, to escalating wrangles over farmland, particularly during the planting and harvesting seasons.

This follows a series of attacks last week in Acholi Ber Parish that left three people injured and more than a dozen homes burnt, sparking renewed fear among residents in the disputed area.

According to the UPDF 4th Division Commander, Brig Felix Busizoori, the clashes are largely driven by competition for land and agricultural resources rather than organised communal fighting.

"These communities usually clash during planting and harvesting seasons when people are competing for land. They are fighting for gardens," Brig Busizoori said.

He downplayed the scale of the violence, describing it as "not alarming", and cautioned against what he termed exaggerated reports, especially on social media.

Local accounts, however, paint a more disturbing picture of the incidents, which residents say were coordinated and targeted.

Witnesses said the attackers struck Teya Village on Tuesday last week, where they attempted to steal livestock and food items, further reinforcing the army's claim that access to farm produce is a driver of the attacks.

At the home of Rosemary Acayo, 50, attackers reportedly tried to steal goats before assaulting her when she resisted. In another incident, a farmer was speared in the hand after refusing to surrender food items.

The attackers later set huts ablaze, with at least 14 homes confirmed destroyed by the following day.

A second attack last Wednesday evening left another man injured, bringing the number of casualties reported by local leaders to at least five, although the UPDF maintains that only one injury has been officially confirmed.

> **Planting seasons.** "These communities usually clash during planting and harvesting seasons when people are competing for land. They are fighting for gardens," Brig Felix Busizoori, UPDF 4th Division Commander

> **Criminal gangs.** "The attackers operated in groups and use multiple entry points, including routes through Zoka Forest. There are many detachments here..," Mr Oyoo John Bosco, a resident from Acholi Ber Parish

Amuru District Chairperson Michael Lakony said the violence is being driven by criminal groups taking advantage of existing land tensions to loot property.

"These are criminals who don't want to work but instead attack communities to gain wealth," Lakony said.

He added that the attacks have triggered fresh displacement, with residents fleeing to safer areas such as Aba Township.

Despite a heavy security presence, local leaders say the attacks continue to occur, often in a hit-and-run style.

According to a local resident of Apaa, Mr John Bosco Oyoo, the attackers operated in groups and use multiple entry points, including routes through Zoka Forest.

"There are many [army] detachments here, but the attackers still manage to sneak in," he said.

The Amuru Resident District Commissioner, Mr Oceng Osborn, confirmed that investigations are ongoing, adding that many attackers cross from distant areas, including across the Nile.

Apaa has for years been a flashpoint of conflict between communities in Amuru and neighbouring Adjumani District, with both sides laying claim to the land.

At the centre of the dispute is access to farmland, which remains the primary source of livelihood for residents. Seasonal farming activities often heighten tensions, increasing the likelihood of violent clashes.

While government interventions have been attempted, a lasting solution to the land question remains elusive.

The UPDF also pointed to challenges in the justice system, claiming that suspects arrested in connection with previous attacks are often released, allowing them to return and perpetrate violence.

"When we arrest them and hand them over [to the police], they are released and come back. This creates a vicious cycle," Brig Busizoori said.

He warned that unless accountability is strengthened, the cycle of violence linked to farmland disputes is likely to persist.

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