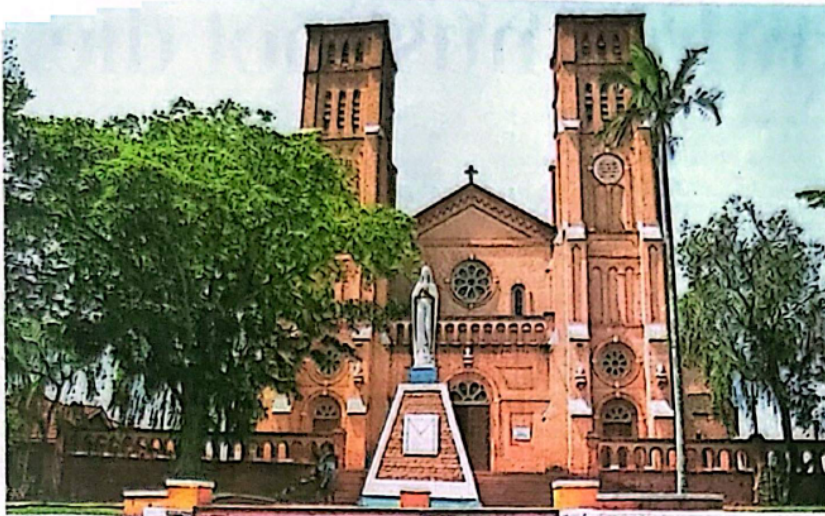




When soldiers invaded the altar at Rubaga

Forty-four years after soldiers stormed Rubaga Cathedral during an Ash Wednesday service, survivors and church leaders' accounts revisit one of the most shocking moments of the Obote II era when the altar became a battlefield.

BY ISAAC MUFUMBA

Forty-four years ago on Tuesday, soldiers of the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA) raided and carried out a search and cordon operation at Rubaga Cathedral.

The invasion of the Cathedral took place on February 24, 1982, an Ash Wednesday. This was during an early morning service. Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent and it is marked by services of penitence among Christians. Lent is a 40-day period of prayer, fasting, and giving of alms.

The congregation of nearly 500 people, including civilians and others who had sought refuge on the premises of the church, were sent scurrying to the safety of other buildings in the compound.

The invasion of the Church premises, a hitherto unheard of development, was reportedly carried out as part of an ongoing security operation that had been launched by the Milton Obote II government against armed rebels who had earlier declared war on the government.

That particular raid was carried out in the name of searching for rebels of the Uganda Freedom Movement (UFM) a rebel organisation led by Dr Andrew Lutakome Kayiira. The rebel leader was killed on March 7, 1987 in a rented home of journalist Henry Gombya in Lukuli Makindye.

Precursor

On February 23, UFM rebels launched an attack on Lubiri. At the time Lubiri was one of the UNLA's military barracks in Kampala. The Lubiri was one of the properties of the Buganda Kingdom which was taken over by the central government after the Obote I government abolished kingdoms and adopted a republican constitution in 1967. The property was handed back to the Buganda Kingdom in December 1997, 31 years after it was first occupied by the central government.

The UFM rebels were, however, repulsed after an eight-hour gun battle with the UNLA. Figures that were released by the government in Kampala at the time indicated that five UNLA soldiers were killed while the rebels outfit lost 67 fighters.

The Lubiri debacle sent UFM into disarray, forcing whatever remained of it as a fighting force to retreat in Mubende and the areas of Mawokota in Mpigi from where most of them joined the National Resistance Army (NRA), the armed wing of the National Resistance Movement (NRM) led by the former Minister of Defence and former vice chairman of the Military Commission, Mr Yoweri Museveni, which was fighting the Obote II government from within the Luweero triangle.

The NRA/M launched its own war against the Obote II government on February 6, 1981 with an attack on Kabamba Military Training School in Mubende.

Rubaga Cathedral in Kampala. In February 1982, the historic Catholic seat became the scene of a dramatic military raid during an Ash Wednesday service. PHOTOS/FILE

1991

Apology. In response to the statement, on March 18, 1982, President Milton Obote tendered an apology to the Roman Catholic Church and Cardinal Emmanuel Nsubuga. Cardinal Nsubuga died in April 1991 in Cologne Germany, where he was being treated for cancer. He was 76. President Obote died in October 2005, in a hospital in Johannesburg, South Africa, at the age of 79.

Church accused

Information that was received at the time indicated that the raid on the Church was ordered by the Army Chief of Staff of the UNLA, Gen David Oyite Ojok.

Gen Oyite Ojok's decision was precipitated by the belief that the Church had consented to the UFM rebels' decision to mount the artillery pieces that they had used in the attack on the Lubiri on the Catholic Church's premises on the nearby Rubaga hill.

Oyite Ojok died on December 2, 1983, at the age of 43, when the helicopter in which he was traveling came down in the Luweero triangle under mysterious circumstances.

At the time of his death, Ojok was heading a military operation against the NRA.

On March 6, 1981, President Obote unveiled plans aimed at clamping down activities of the NRA. Then again on March 22, 1981, his government launched a campaign that aimed to wipe the rebels out of their bases and camps in Luweero.

Much as Obote, the Commander in Chief, had endorsed the military operations, anecdotes from circles within his Uganda Peoples' Congress (UPC) suggest that he never endorsed the invasion of the Cathedral.

It is said that he felt that such a move would leave the image of his government in tatters. Moreover at a time when the government was already under the microscope over allegations of human rights violations during the course of its fight with NRA rebels.

Witness account

Fr Joseph Nkera, who witnessed the invasion first hand, told *Sunday Monitor* in a February 2020 interview that he and two other priests, Fr Mpalanyi Katumba, and Fr Bwire, were conducting Mass on the fateful day.

"Half way through the Mass, I saw soldiers at the main entrance. They shouted 'stop' and I instinctively asked them 'why'. They cocked their guns and moved very fast to the altar where we were," he recalled.

The soldiers' actions sparked a stampede.

"Children were ordered out. As they scrambled for the exit, the priests were dragged out of the church to the parish offices. The scene was chaotic," he added.

Some of the priests were subjected to rough treatment. Some were beaten with gun butts and kicked amid demand that they show the UNLA soldiers where the rebels and their guns had been hidden.

Search, ultimatum

According to Fr Nkera, the soldiers searched the parish offices and the private residence of Cardinal Emmanuel Nsubuga who was away on the Church's farm in Kyankwanzu.

The operation was later extended to the rest of Rubaga Division which had already been cordoned off as soldiers went in search of rebels, their alleged collaborators and arms.

The operation compelled a large section of the division's population to flee their homes. Some ironically sought refuge at the Cathedral only to find that it too had been cordoned off.

About 60 residents who had gone to seek refuge there were taken away by the UNLA soldiers for alleged screening, but 44 years since they were taken away, some of them remain unaccounted for.

Cardinal Nsubuga cut short his stay in Kyankwanzu and returned to Kampala where he issued a four page statement in which he issued an ultimatum to the government to either apologise or face a Catholic Church boycott of State functions.

"In view of what has happened and the suspicion aroused, I would appreciate an apology from the government for the insult and the harm done to the Catholic Church of which I am the head. The violation of sacred premises is an extremely serious matter of which I am under obligation to inform the Holy Father. Should an apology not be made I don't see how I could reasonably participate in any public function to which I might be invited in the future," the Cardinal wrote.

In the same document, he protested the conduct of the soldiers and their treatment of the congregation.

"I hereby protest in the strongest terms against the godless and sacrilegious act of some members of the Uganda army in violating my cathedral and using military force on, especially the congregation which was attending a religious function," he wrote.

The Cardinal used the same statement to dismiss allegations that the Church's premises in Kyankwanzu were being used as a training ground for rebels of the NRA.

"I protest before God as firmly as I am able against the use of the military force in obliging three priests to leave the Higher Altar in their vestments during a solemn act of divine worship. Finally I protest against absurd allegations concerning the Kyankwanzu farm where I was staying, namely that guerrillas were being trained by me at the farm," he wrote.



Maj Gen David Oyite-Ojok, then Chief of Staff of the Uganda National Liberation Army, 1981