



An illustration of the Iranian Foreign Affairs minister arriving at Entebbe airport in 1997. ILLUSTRATION/ IVAN SSENYONJO

Iran minister hops from Khartoum to Kampala to save Tehran agreement

Uganda and Sudan had the previous year signed a peace pact brokered by the visiting Iranian president who was completing a six-nation tour of Africa to break isolation imposed by the West and enter into partnerships with Africa.

BY ISAAC MUFUMBA

Twenty nine years ago, on Tuesday last week, visiting Iranian minister for Foreign Affairs, Ali Akbar Velayati, announced that discussing the dispute between Uganda and Sudan with authorities in the two countries was high on his agenda.

The Monitor of March 14, 1997, reported that Velayati made the announcement on March 12, 1997, soon after he arrived in Khartoum on a tour of duty that would also see him visit Kampala the following day.

His comments came at a time when the authorities in Sudan were chest thumping, claiming that the Sudanese military had inflicted heavy casualties on the Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF).

Al-Tayeb Ibrahim Mohamed Khair, the Sudan minister for Culture and Information, was on March 13, 1997, quoted by the State radio in Khartoum, saying his country's military had crushed an attack by Ugandan forces in the south of the country, destroying tanks and causing a large number of casualties.

"The armed forces attacked Ugandan troops in the Lanya area, destroying tanks, seizing arms and inflicting huge losses in lives," he was quoted to have said.

"The types of arms used confirm that Uganda has received foreign support," he was further quoted to have said, but fell short of revealing who Uganda's foreign backers were. Sudanese newspapers had on the same day reported that a Sudan army commander was killed during the battle in the Lanya area, about 100kms west of Juba, the main southern Sudanese city.

Sudan had accused Uganda of direct military involvement in attacks in southern Sudan, where the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) was fighting Khartoum's forces. Uganda, however, denied involvement in the fighting.

The Monitor further reported that the Akbar al-Youm newspaper had on March 13, 1997, quoted then Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir as vowing to recapture "in the next few days" all areas held by SPLA and foreign forces.

The SPLA had been fighting Khartoum since 1983, demanding independence for the mainly Christian south of Sudan from the Muslim and Arabised north.

On March 9, 1997, the SPLA announced that its forces had captured Kaya in southern Sudan and were advancing on Juba.

Counter accusations

Sudan's accusations at that particular time that the UPDF was fighting alongside the SPLA was only the latest in a long-running dispute between the two countries, precipitated by accusations that each was aiding the other's rebels.

Uganda had always accused Sudan of supporting the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebels who were wreaking havoc in northern Uganda, with, among other things, military training, arms and uniforms.

The government in Khartoum also accused the government in Kampala of offering similar support to the SPLM/A.

It was mainly due to those counter-accusations that the two countries severed diplomatic ties in 1995.

It should be remembered that President Museveni, while addressing the media in Kampala on September 14, 1994, accused Sudan of having been supportive of rebel activity in northern Uganda since 1986, when his National Resistance Movement/Army (NRM/A) took power in Kampala.

The President said Sudan had, on August 22, 1986, supplied arms to former soldiers of the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA) with the idea of helping them capture power.

"We have all the information [and] the Sudan government has got to stop this or else we have ways of defending ourselves," this newspaper quoted President Museveni as saying.

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Peace pact

It should be remembered that the two countries had the previous September signed a peace pact brokered by the visiting president of Iran, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was completing a six-nation tour of Africa that saw him visit Kenya, Uganda, Sudan, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and South Africa, as the Iran of moved to break isolation imposed by the West and enter into partnerships with Africa.

During the visit to Uganda, Iranian and Ugandan officials signed seven economic accords in the areas of oil, industry, building dams and infrastructure projects, agriculture, and trade.

"Building a number of dams on the [River] Nile can provide 10,000 megawatts of electricity for the region. This is a great wealth, and is

ACCUSATIONS

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more precious than hundreds of oil wells in Iran, we have been building six major dams on the Karun River, and we have the expertise to assist the African nations in this field," said Rafsanjani, who visited the River Nile.

The 13-point peace agreement, which was signed in Khartoum on September 9, 1996, sought to eliminate separatist groups and their backers as a means by which peace would be restored to both southern Sudan and northern Uganda.

The meeting culminated in the signing on November 4, 1996, of the "New Tehran Agreement" in Tehran, by Uganda's deputy prime minister and minister for Foreign Affairs, Eriya Kategaya, and Sudan's minister for Foreign Affairs, Ali Osman Mohamed Taha.

No effect

What was happening near the common border of the two countries as of March 1997 suggested that the peace pact signed in Khartoum and the agreement signed in Tehran had not served to help improve relations between the two countries.

There were doubts in Khartoum that Uganda would keep its side of the pact.

Inayat Abdelhamid Inayat, the chairperson of the Foreign Relations Committee of the Sudanese parliament, who had previously served as Sudan's ambassador to Uganda, had been quoted by Reuters on March 11, 1997, saying the attack in the south of the country was aimed at trying to stop Iran from reconciling the two countries.

"Uganda wants to stop dialogue aimed at improving ties with Sudan, and the attack is a message to Iran to stop its mediation," Inayat said.

It would, however, look like some circles in Tehran also had suspicions about Uganda's commitment to the pact. An alleged executive intelligence review of September 20, 1996, authored by one Hussein al-Nadeem, claimed that the pact had always been bad news for some Western powers that had allegedly been controlling and using Uganda, "as a base to launch a dirty operation aiming at overthrowing the government of Sudan and dividing that country, through support for the south Sudanese separatist rebels, such as the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA)".

"A Uganda-based 'humanitarian' operation was put at the disposal of the SPLA, to continue the war which has devastated the southern region of Sudan," the report added.

However, Velayati, who said he had brought a written message from his president for his Sudanese counterpart, was more optimistic.

"The sides that signed the agreement have to keep whatever was agreed in the agreement," he said.

Provisions of the Khartoum Pact and the Tehran Agreement did not hold.

Decades of fighting between forces of the government in Khartoum and the SPLA ended with the signing on January 9, 2005, in Naivasha, Kenya, of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA).

A referendum was held in January 2011, which saw 98.3 percent of the people vote for secession. That paved the way for South Sudan to become an independent state effective July 9, 2011.