

Libya, PLO enter 1979 war as Tanzania advances on Kampala

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Forty one years ago last Saturday, Libya dispatched a contingent of fighters to fight alongside the Uganda Army (UA) as it desperately fought to halt an advance by a combined force composed of the Tanzania People's Defence Force (TPDF) and combatants from exiled Uganda groups.

Some of the Ugandans who were fighting beside the Tanzanian soldiers were drawn from Kikoosi Maalum, which was composed of fighters loyal to the exiled Uganda Peoples Congress (UPC) leader, Milton Obote, and the Front for National Salvation (Fronasa).

Kikoosi Maalum was under the joint command of Gen Tito Okello and Brig David Oyite-Ojok, while Fronasa forces were under the command of Yoweri Museveni, who had no rank at the time.

Reports of the arrival of Libyan fighters in Uganda were first reported in the *New York Times* edition of March 1979.

"They (sources) said tanks, fighter planes, heavy artillery and infantry weapons have been arriving at Entebbe, Uganda's international airport on Lake Victoria, in Libyan and Ugandan planes for the last week," the newspaper reported.

Precursor

It should be remembered that the war, which is variously referred to as the "1979 war" or "the Liberation War", was precipitated by an incursion that sections of the Uganda Army made into northern Tanzania in October 1978. The troops marched southwards towards Kyaka Bridge.

Tanzania demanded that the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), now the African Union (AU), condemn Uganda for its actions, but the organisation somehow failed to do so.

On November 1, 1979, then-president Idi Amin announced the annexation of the Kagera salient. Julius Nyerere, then president of Tanzania, demanded that Amin renounce his claims to the salient.

The following day, November 2, 1979, he declared war on Uganda.

Strained relations

It should be remembered that relations between the two countries had been strained for more than seven years, the precursor being the September 1972 invasion of Ugan-

da by Tanzania with fighters who were believed to be loyal to Obote.

Obote, a friend of Nyerere, had been living in exile in Tanzania since he was deposed by Amin in a January 1971 military coup.

The invaders were crushed and forced to beat a hasty retreat to Tanzania. A subsequent armistice provided that the two countries withdraw their forces from their common border.

TPDF's response

Whereas Nyerere had declared war on Uganda on November 2, 1978, it was not until January 21, 1979, that TPDF and its allies started attacking the Uganda Army's positions at Mutukula and Minziro.

The Uganda Army (UA) was soon overpowered, forcing the officers of the Suicide Regiment to withdraw.

TPDF and its allies seized the initiative and advanced in a two-pronged attack. One group of fighters advanced on UA's positions in the west of the country. That was referred to as the western axis.

The other group advanced on UA position to the east of the country. That was referred to as the eastern axis.

Ugandan fighters attached to Kikoosi Maalum fought mostly on the eastern axis, while their Fronasa counterparts fought mostly on the western axis.



Former Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi (left) and President Museveni.

Within a few weeks, TPDF and their allies had captured the towns of Mbarara and Masaka. Fighters on the eastern axis soon started advancing on the capital Kampala.

Enter Libya

The *New York Times* reported that the 2,500 Libyan fighters who had been deployed had arrived with some specialised military equipment.

"Libya staged a major airlift of combat forces to Kampala and Entebbe, sending 2,500 troops with T-54 and T-55 tanks, BTR APCs, BM-21 'Katyusha' multiple-rocket launchers (MRLs), artillery, MiG-21s, and a Tu-22 bomb-

er," it reported.

It would, however, appear that the Libyan troops had arrived in Uganda a month before The *New York Times* reported the development. The website, www.ospreypublishing.com, a British publishing firm which specialises in reporting on military history, reported a few years ago that Libyan fighters had actually arrived in Uganda in February 1979.

PLO deploys

The Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) of Yasser Arafat also deployed some of its commandos to fight alongside soldiers of the UA. Amin has been very supportive of PLO.

It should be remembered that Amin allowed Palestinians who belonged to the external wing of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP-EO), and German who belonged to the Revolutionary Cells, or RZ, a part of the Baader-Meinhof gang, who hijacked the Air France Flight 139, a Boeing 707 Jetliner with 250 passengers including 83 Israeli nationals, which was hijacked on June 28, 1976 as it was flying from Tel Aviv for Paris via Athens to land in Entebbe.

Amin claimed that he had allowed the hijackers who demanded the release from jails in Israel, France, West Germany and Switzerland, 53 of their comrades, to land in Uganda on "humanitarian grounds", but it was generally known that he was fully supportive of the PLO, whose leaders he had hounded.

The hijacking culminated in the July 4, 1976, operation in which 100 Israeli Commandos staged a 90-minute sting operation on Entebbe airport, rescued 102 hostages, killed the hijackers and 45 Ugandan soldiers and destroyed more than 20 Russian-built MiG-17s and MiG-21 jets of the Uganda Air Force.

The PLO was therefore reciprocating the gesture of support.

The arrival of the Libyan and

PLO troops coincided with a decision by the Military Council to appoint president Amin, Chief of Staff of the Uganda Army, a move which was aimed at boosting the morale of his soldiers.

That development and the arrival of the Libyan troops and their military hardware had been expected to halt the TPDF's rapid advance on Kampala.

Libya's denials

Despite the report that its soldiers had arrived in Kampala, the leadership in Tripoli initially denied the reports, insisting that the only Libyan nationals in Uganda at the time were bankers, teachers and medical doctors.

The bankers that the Libyan government was talking about were those attached to what was then known as the Libyan Arab Uganda Bank, which was established in 1973 and was jointly owned by the Libyan Foreign Bank (LFB) and the government of Uganda. The bank was later rebranded to Tropical Africa Bank and then Tropical Bank.

Gaddafi rebuffed

It should be remembered that Nyerere snubbed an attempt in January 1979 by the president of Libya, Col Muammar Gaddafi, to stop the fighting, insisting that the fighting would only stop if member states of the OAU condemned Amin.

Nyerere also demanded that Uganda pay reparations for the damage that it had caused in northern Tanzania.

It would appear that Nyerere's stand angered the Libyan strongman so much that he chose to deploy on the side of the Uganda Army.

According to www.ospreypublishing.com, the Libyan contingent included "a hodgepodge of regular units, People's Militia, and members of the Islamic Pan-African Legion - a force of sub-Saharan Africans equipped and trained by the Libyans (and reinforced with several mercenaries) to serve as an expeditionary force in that kind of operation, and precisely this sort of operation".

Annihilation in Lukaya

According to www.ospreypublishing.com, the TPDF's advance on Kampala suffered an initial reversal in Lukaya on the night of March 11 to March 12, 1979.

The 201st Brigade was deployed to directly cross the causeway over the swamp, while the elite 208th Brigade was

deployed to outflank the western edge of the swamp, but was met by a combined force of UA, PLO and Libyan fighters backed by 15 T-55 tanks, over a dozen APCs, and landrovers mounted with 106-mm recoilless guns and a battery of BM-21 MRL.

TPDF were not only caught by surprise, but they had never come under so much firepower. They fled from the town.

Fortunately for TPDF, their adversaries did not build on this victory to launch a counteroffensive to retake Masaka. This allowed TPDF to regroup and launch a surprise double-pronged attack in which the 201st Brigade attacked the main defensive lines from the south, while the 208 Brigade drove east to the Lukaya-Kampala road, then turned south and hit the enemy from the rear.

The commander of UA tank division, Col Godwin Sule, was killed along with an estimated 400 Ugandan and 200 Libyan fighters in the battle that turned out to be the biggest resistance that the UA and their allies put up before the fall of Kampala in April 1979.

