

Sudan diplomats given 48 hours to leave Uganda

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BY ISAAC MUFUMBA

“

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—Ms Lisa Heilbronn, then acting public affairs officer at the US embassy in Kampala.

Thirty-one years ago, yesterday, it emerged that Uganda's decision to sever diplomatic ties with Sudan had arisen out of a political clash and concerns over the personal safety of President Museveni.

Uganda severed diplomatic ties with Sudan in April 1996 amid increased tensions fuelled by accusations that they were both funding each other's rebels.

Whereas Uganda accused Sudan of supporting the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) 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 Sudan Peoples' Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), which was fighting for independence for the Christian and animist south of the country.

South Sudan eventually gained independence on July 9, 2011, after a January 2011 referendum where 98.83 percent of voters chose separation from the predominantly Arab and Muslim north.

Façaade

At the time, it was stated that the

immediate cause of severing ties had been the refusal by the Sudanese diplomats in Kampala to hand over a cache of arms that were believed to have been in their possession.

The Sudan News Agency (SANA) reported on April 21 that security operatives in Kampala had subsequently raided the home of the military attaché. Though the agency reported that they had not accessed the premises, it considered it a breach of diplomatic procedures and protocols.

“The Ugandan authorities... ordered the Ugandan security forces to beat up and fire at members of the embassy. After this, they laid siege to the office of the military attaché, in a flagrant violation of the Vienna agreement on diplomatic relations,” the agency reported.

The Kenya News Agency also reported that the authorities in Kampala had, before the raid, issued an order directing several Sudanese diplomats to leave Uganda.

“On April 21, Uganda served notice of expulsion on 11 diplomats in the Sudanese embassy in Kampala, giving four of them 48 hours to leave the country and the others to leave within 14 days. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs said the measure was aimed at equalising the two countries' diplomatic representation in Kampala and Khartoum. Neither embassy will have more than five officials,” KNA reported.

On the list of those who were ordered out of Uganda within 48 hours was the first secretary, Hassan Muhammad al-Tom; the military attaché, Lt-Col Haidar al-Hadi Hajj Omar; and the administrative attachés, Adam Muhammad Abd

al-Hadi Adam and Badr ad-Din Hussein Rizqi Hussein.

Seven others, Mu'tasim al-Amin Muhammad al-Hassan; Awad Taha al-Tom Taha; press attaché Hassan al-Umdah; Abdallah al-Badr al-Bari; Khalid Mahmud Hamad; and Abdallah Abd al-Karim Abdallah, were given a fortnight to exit Uganda.

“The two countries are undoing the pledge made by Sudan's Vice President, Zubeir Muhammad Salih, and Uganda's Vice Prime Minister, Eriya Kategaya, to normalise their relations,” KNA noted.

The raid and subsequent expulsion of diplomats came a day after LRA, under the command of Vincent Otti Lagony, the deputy commander of the rebel force, raided Atiak Trading Centre and Atiak Camp in Kilak County, Gulu District and massacred 155 people.

Atiak Camp was where most of the people had been forced to settle following the outbreak of the war.

So gruesome were the LRA's actions that Mr Joshua Opinga, Tanzania's High Commissioner to Uganda, described it as “a tragedy of unimaginable proportions”.

Security concerns

However, 21 days after Uganda had ordered the diplomats out, it emerged that the alleged cache of arms was a façade.

Quoting the Indian Ocean Newsletter (ION) of early May 1995, The Monitor of May 10, 1995, reported that President Museveni had become convinced that his personal safety was in danger and that the government in Khartoum wanted him assassinated.

The newspaper reported that the ION had reported that “both the

Uganda and US intelligence had uncovered a plot against Museveni's life, with the leading role played by the Sudanese military attaché to Uganda, Lt Col Hayder El-Hadi Omer”.

ION was quoted to have reported that Lt Col Omer was a member of the Sudanese intelligence, adding that the sudden increase in the number of members of staff who had been attached to the Sudanese embassy in Kampala had been part of the plot to assassinate Mr Museveni.

The alleged assassination was reportedly planned to send a message to Sudan's neighbours and their allies, the United States, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel, that Sudan also had allies.

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of using Uganda as a base to check the spread of Islamic fundamentalism propagated by Hassan Turabi.

Hassan Turabi, a politician and Muslim cleric, was believed to have been the brain behind the 1999 military coup that brought Gen Omar al-Bashir to power. He died in 2016.

Counter accusations

Earlier in the year, Sudan had accused Uganda of having invited a contingent of more than 400 US Marines to help it if relations between the two countries were to deteriorate to the extent of going to war.

Those accusations were fuelled by a September 14, 1994, declaration by President Museveni that he was ready to fight Sudan because of its role in funding the Joseph Kony-led rebellion that was raging in northern Uganda.

Speaking during a press conference held at his offices in the Parliament Buildings, Mr Museveni said he was aware that Sudan had been fully supportive of the LRA, which take power and rule Uganda based on the Biblical 10 Commandments.

Mr Museveni added that Sudan had supported rebel activity in the north since 1986, when his National Resistance Movement/Army (NRM/A) took power, adding that it had, on August 22, 1986, supplied arms to ramp up the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA), which the NRA had defeated, with the idea of helping them to capture power.

“We have all the information [and] the Sudan government has got to stop this or else we have ways of defending ourselves,” Mr Museveni said.

Mr Museveni's comments came against a backdrop of reports that the Sudanese government forces had been amassing troops north of the common border between the two countries in preparation for a major offensive against the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Army (SPLA), whose forces were said to have been encamped around the border towns of Nimule and Kajo-Keji.

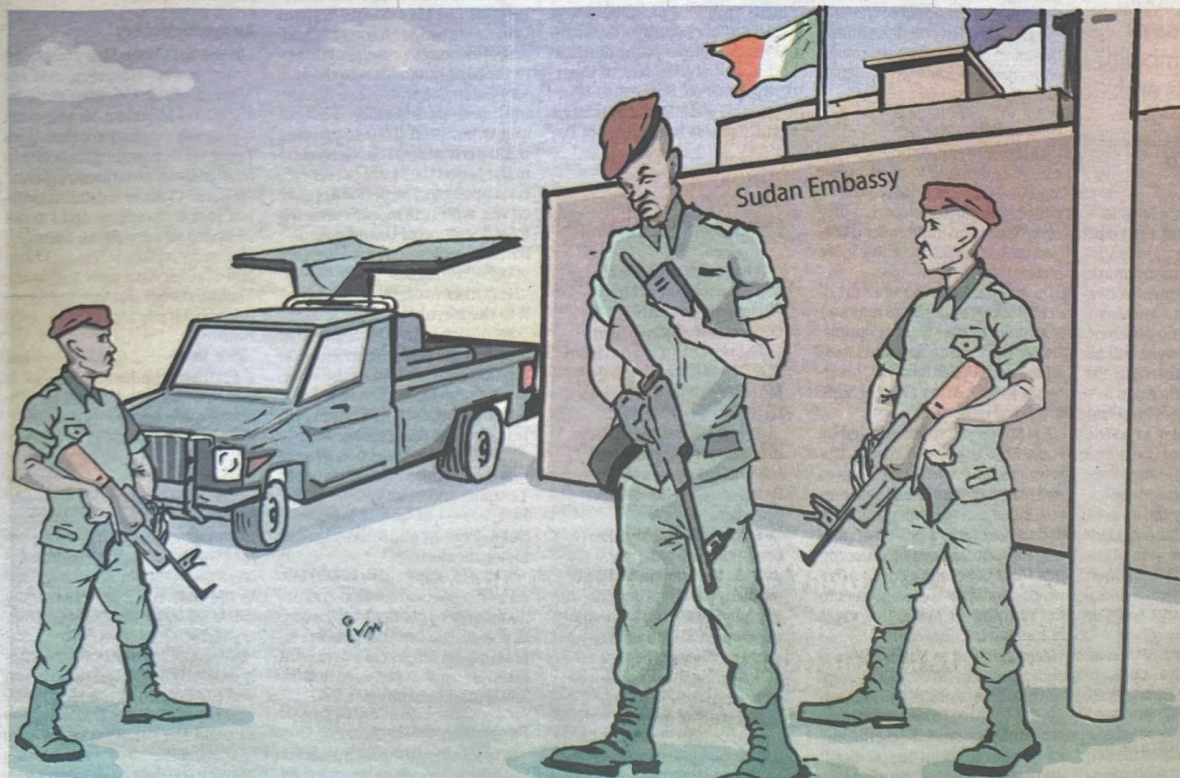
US denials

The United States, however, denied having deployed to Uganda. The Monitor of May 10, 1997, reported that the acting public affairs officer at the US embassy in Kampala, Ms Lisa Heilbronn, had told the newspaper that to the best of her knowledge, no Marines had come to help the NRA to fight Sudan.

“My suspicion is that people can mistake the ongoing training programmes between the NRA and the US army for that kind of thing. The training programme has been going on for the last four years,” Ms Heilbronn said.

It should be remembered that the United States and Uganda signed a pact in March 1994, under which Uganda was to receive considerable military assistance.

The pact, which was informed by the genocide that broke out in neighbouring Rwanda, provided for training in, among other things, peacekeeping, crisis response, and capacity building for humanitarian relief as part of a programme that was aimed at improving the capacity of African countries to respond and manage crises under what was known as the African Crisis Response Initiative (ACRI).



An illustration of security operatives in Kampala outside the home of the Sudanese military attaché. ILLUSTRATION/ IVAN SENYONJO