

Obote stings West, OAU for not stopping Idi Amin

Former president Milton Obote made the remarks on May 27, 1980, in a speech he gave shortly after he touched down in Uganda after nine years in exile.

BY ISAAC MUFUMBA

Forty-six years ago on Wednesday, former president Milton Obote launched a virulent attack on countries in the West, accusing them of doing nothing to stop the killings of innocent Ugandans during president Idi Amin's eight-year rule.

Instead of stopping the killings, which he said were of proportions close to a genocide, Obote said most countries in the West had maintained diplomatic relations with the regime and even provided it with arms and technology to facilitate its murderous agenda.

"For whilst Amin and his bandits were plundering our material resources, desecrating our cultural heritage and carrying out what was tantamount to a genocide in Uganda, the world - except Tanzania, Zambia, Somalia, Botswana and Sudan - just sat by and watched. Indeed, most of the countries maintained diplomatic relations and some not only carried on trading, but sold to this butcher, no doubt at exorbitant prices, weapons and other electronic gadgets to carry out his massacres more efficiently," Obote said.

Obote made the remarks on May 27, 1980, in a speech he gave shortly after he touched down in Uganda after nine years in exile.

He said after the response that the civilised world made in response to the atrocities committed by Adolf Hitler in Nazi Germany and most parts of Europe, it was ironic that the world had looked the other way as Amin ran amok.

"It is ironic that after all the pontifications by the leaders of our so-called civilised world about the horror and atrocities committed by Hitler during the Second World War, no leader of any major power felt compelled to put an end to similar atrocities committed by the monster in Uganda in the last quarter of the 20th Century," Obote said in his much-publicised speech.

Officially, this was his first return to Uganda, but the *Washington Post* reported in its edition of May 28, 1980, that it had learnt that he had, with the consent of the Tanzanian government, "made at least three clandestine trips to Uganda to consult with government officials in the months since Tanzanian-backed rebels ousted Amin in April 1979".

The newspaper further reported that the former president, who had been in exile in Tanzania following his ouster by his former army commander, Gen Idi Amin, on January 26, 1971, returned to Uganda aboard a Tanzanian military plane.

"With tears in his eyes, the former president kissed the soil as he stepped down from a Tanzanian military plane in the southwestern

town of Bushenyi," the newspaper reported.

Doubts about return

Obote's return had been in doubt following stiff resistance from sections of exiled groups that had participated in the war and the Moshi Conference, which opened on March 24, 1979, and closed on March 26, 1979.

Whereas Obote did not participate in the conference, some people and organisations that were loyal to him attended the same. They included top Gen Tito Okello Lutwa and Brig David Oyite-Ojok, who were the top commanders of the Kikosi Malaamu, a fighting group that fought alongside the Tanzania People's Defence Force (TPDF); Uganda Action Group of Paulo Muwanga and the Uganda National Unity and Reconciliation Organisation of Eric Otema Alimadi.

STINGING OAU

Speaking in Bushenyi, where he landed, Obote also had no kind words for the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), now African Union (AU), for what he described as honouring Amin.

"Near home, the OAU honoured the monster by holding its summit meeting in Kampala in 1975 and appointing him its chairman for a whole year," he said.

The conference, which was sponsored by president Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, aimed to avert the possibility of a power vacuum after the fall of Amin, and it indeed elected Prof Yusuf Lule as president.

Lule was deposed on June 20, 1979, after only 68 days in power. Eighteen out of 32 members of the National Consultative Council (NCC), which was Uganda's interim Parliament after the fall of Amin, voted to kick him out of office accusing him of among other things having "ignored democratic methods" of work; failure to consult the NCC; failure to set up systems to facilitate economic recovery and "arbitrarily" going about the reorganisation of local governments.

Former attorney general Godfrey Binaisa was on the same day installed as Lule's successor.

Blocking Obote

Binaisa and his ministers worked hard to ensure Obote did not come back to Uganda.

Hiding under the need to forge unity as a prerequisite for national recovery and development, Binaisa got the NCC to endorse his idea of holding the 1980 elections under the umbrella of the Uganda National Liberation Front (UNLF).

That meant that there would be no campaigning along the lines of the old political parties. It also meant that Obote could not return to lead his Uganda Peoples Congress (UPC) into the elections.

Despite the fact that the NCC had its say on the election, Obote announced that he would be returning to Uganda on May 27, 1980, to lead his party into the election.

Dr Barnabas Kununka, who was the minister for the Interior and head of the security police, immediately announced that he would arrest whoever would attend any political rallies organised by UPC.

It would appear that Obote would not have returned or would have been arrested if Binaisa had not been deposed on May 10 1980, and

replaced by the Military and Presidential Commission two days later.

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It should be remembered that the OAU summit in 1975 was famously held in Kampala. The International Conference Centre and the Nile Mansions Hotel, both now part of the Serena Hotel Complex, were completed in time for the said summit.

Stinging the Commonwealth

Obote also did not have any kind words for the Commonwealth, which he said had taken so long to speak out on the brutality of Amin's regime.

"Similarly, it took more than six years of continuous murders before the Commonwealth felt obliged to condemn the happenings in Uganda at its conference in 1977," Obote said.

It should be remembered that the Commonwealth heads of government condemned president Amin's regime for its "disregard for the sanctity of human life" and its "massive violation of basic human rights".

In a June 15, 1977 communique that was released at the end of an eight-day Commonwealth conference held in England and Scotland, representatives of 34 nations asserted that the "excesses" in Uganda were "so gross as to warrant the world's concern and to evoke condemnation by heads of government in strong and unequivocal terms".

The *New York Times* reported in its June 16, 1977, edition, that the heads of government had, as a compromise, avoided mentioning president Amin by name.

The newspaper reported that even before the communique was issued, Radio Uganda broadcast a reply from the president, quoting him as suggesting that Israel, South Africa and Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) should be admitted to the Commonwealth, which, he asserted, had become an "imperialist and racist club".

According to the newspaper, the communique's strong language had raised questions about the safety and fate of about 300 Britons who were living in Uganda at the time.

There was special concern about the fate of one Robert Scanlon, a 44-year-old motor company executive who had taken up Uganda citizenship in 1975. The executive, who had been born in Britain, had been arrested on spying charges. It was not clear at the time whether he had been executed.

According to the newspaper, Amin had dominated most accounts of the conference to the irritation of Leonard James Callaghan, who was the prime minister of Britain at the time.

Even though the British government had made it clear to Amin that he was not welcome, *Radio Uganda* aired several bulletins of his "impending arrival" for the conference.



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An illustration of former president Milton Obote criticising Western powers and African leaders. ILLUSTRATION/MARIE PATRICIA NATAKWA