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Weighing Uganda's options in Somalia

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As the proverbial dust settles following the Kampala bombings, many questions are being asked. There is the predictable “why us?” asked by Ugandans who, for one or other reason, had no idea their country had anything to do with Somalia, and for whom the name al Shabaab is a recent discovery. For them the simple connection between the UPDF's presence in Mogadishu, al

Shabaab's promise to bring the war to Kampala last year and the actual bombing has been anything but obvious.

And then there is the question of what the logical response from the Uganda government should be. The central idea here is whether Uganda should not withdraw its troops.

Those who pose this one come in two groups: those who believed, right from the time the UPDF first went into Somalia, that it was a terrible mistake which would end in tears, and those who supported the deployment in the possibly naïve belief that our troops would be welcomed by the war-weary Somalis, but who are now angry because they see the bombs as evidence of the Somalis' ingratitude.

Those who believe that violence should be answered with violence are asking why the Uganda government does not flood Somalia with troops to

pursue the militants. This seductively hawkish attitude is fed by the questionable belief that Uganda has what it takes in financial, human, and other resources to retaliate meaningfully and ensure we are not bombed again. And then there are the conspiracy theorists. They wonder who actually carried out the bombing and have suggested a whole range of possibilities, many not suitable for debate in this forum.

President Museveni's typically self-assured and belligerent response to the attacks leaves no doubt as to which side of the debate he is on. He has promised to give the militants a dose of their own medicine and to protect Ugandans from any future attempts at bringing the war to Kampala. For the man and woman in the street who had started fearing for the future, such re-assurance, never mind what it really means, did a lot to boost confidence in the government's ability to offer protection.

However, anyone who is more than superficially familiar with the issues involved as well as with Somalia's history since the collapse of the Siad Barre regime and the implosion of the Somali state in the early 1990s would have taken the President's brave remarks with more than a pinch of salt.

There are several reasons why any decision to unleash the UPDF on the militants in Somalia should be considered carefully. Since the early 1990s Somalia has become the graveyard of several well-meaning humanitarian, peace-keeping and peace-enforcement missions, those spear-heading them having decided to cut and run after the Somalis, including those who had previously been fighting among themselves, ganged up and turned their guns on them.

The UN, the Americans, Australians and Pakistanis have all been there, on well-funded

missions which, the usual clever assessments aside, ended in failure. For the Americans, it is the memory of the Somali's tenacity under fire and the fear of taking heavy casualties that accounts for their preference for subcontracting the likes of the Ugandans to go in and do the donkey work. It is doubtful the UPDF will succeed where better-trained, better-resourced, and better-prepared forces with clearer mandates have failed.

One may argue that the UPDF is not going to be there alone, given that plans are underway by the African Union to bring in other countries. True. However, if we were to assume that there are many countries prepared to go in, we would have to ask why they have waited for Kampala to be bombed before making up their minds. And now that al Shabaab has proved to the world that it possesses the capacity to operate beyond Somalia's borders, this in itself will likely give potential contributors to the AU forces more pause for

thought. It cannot be for nothing that Somalia's neighbour, Kenya, which has borne the brunt of hosting Somali refugees and has a substantial Somali population of its own, has judged it wise to keep out.

Looking at the internal dynamics within Uganda and the wider geo-politics of the Great Lakes region, still one would wonder about the wisdom of committing large numbers of troops to the crisis in Somalia. The LRA is hardly completely defeated. In recent times there have been rumblings of a possible return to war by the ADF.

While the LRA's relocation to the Central African Republic and the ADF's retreat into the DRC raise the possibility that they will never return to make war on Ugandan soil, with the UPDF battling al Shabaab in Mogadishu and chasing after cattle rustlers in Karamoja, they may as well try. Add to all this the possibility of renewed war in

Sudan after next year's referendum in the South, and the dangers it will open up for Ugandans in the north and you see why we may be taking on a burden we could not possibly carry. Are these arguments in favour of Uganda's immediate withdrawal from Somalia? They are not.

In addition to amounting to a humiliating climb-down a proud Museveni cannot stomach, a hasty retreat would leave a vacuum the militants would exploit to bring a quick and messy end to the transitional government. While it may lead to a quick imposition of order by the victorious militants, it would almost certainly bring the Islamophobic Ethiopians back in with unpredictable consequences.

The Ugandans must stay pending a solution by a much wider circle of participants in the process leading to it than simply IGAD, the AU and the UN. In Afghanistan the once

unthinkable option of engaging the Taliban in dialogue is now being pushed by even senior generals to whom it has become clear a shooting war is unwinnable. It is doubtful attempts by foreigners to impose peace on Somalia will succeed.

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