

THE CITIZEN

OPINION/EDITORIAL

OBBO: The region's armies are 'smart': They are creating a political federation

IN SUMMARY

- Why don't East African armies flee? For starters, they have a lot of practice fighting at home, in neighbouring countries

A headline in Daily Nation said that "KDF troops set to join regional standby force". The Kenya Defence Forces, it reports, is set to get approval to contribute troops to the East Africa Standby Force (EASF).

EASF's business is to keep the region during times of conflict, the paper reminds us, in situations such as in Somalia and South Sudan. Lately, they are working together on counter-terrorism.

Its present members are Kenya, Burundi, Comoros, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Seychelles, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda.

EASF is the most advanced in formation, of all the African standby brigades. All this might seem like ordinary stuff, but it isn't. The thing with modern Eastern African armies, from Djibouti, Eritrean, Ethiopian, the two Sudans, the Burundians, the Rwandans, (lately even) the Congolese, the Kenyans, the Tanzanians is that they stand and fight.

They don't, like happened in Mali, take flight when they hear rumours of rebels advancing. And they don't do the Naija scoot. Recently, the Boko Haram militants overran a town in northeastern Nigeria. The soldiers fled with the civilians--barefoot and in vests.

The Nigerian army was once mighty, roaming West Africa, knocking heads of warlords and restoring order. Its recent collapse is truly bewildering.

Why don't East African armies flee? For starters, they have a lot of practice fighting at home, in neighbouring countries, and working in troubled lands like Somalia, South Sudan, the Darfur region, and so forth. But some of it has to do with the craft that they have developed from their joint military exercises, especially the East African Community armies.

Some time ago I read a leaked brief from the EAC headquarters. One of the fascinating bits was on the joint military and training exercises, many of them with the US military, that the regional forces hold -- and we in the media never get to know. There are many.

In July during the 20th liberation anniversary in Rwanda, I went on a trip that traced the route of the Rwanda Patriotic Army rebels during the war that eventually brought Paul Kagame to power.

One of the stops was Gabiro, scene of a lot of military activity during the war. It used to be a village when we covered the war. Now it is a small modernish town. It also has a Combat Training School. The school is also the East African regional training centre for non-commissioned officers. You hear about these military training schools in Africa, and most times they are just shacks and overgrown grounds.

The Gabiro centre will surprise you. It is a world-class facility, and there the region's NCOs hone their battlefield skills--again, without us in the media knowing.

What we are saying is that the EASF is another step in a major reorganisation of our militaries that could fundamentally change even how national politics is conducted in East Africa in the years to come.

My own sense is that because terrorism has become transnational, and regional crises like South Sudan have consequences way beyond their borders, in organising as standby brigades, or peace-enforcement consortiums (Uganda, Burundi, Ethiopia, Kenya, Djibouti in Somalia), the militaries are creating a regional federation. Only that they are not aware they are doing so.

But even without that, the expansion of the military role all over Africa is happening in subtle and sophisticated ways. In Liberia and Sierra Leone, they have been deployed to enforce Ebola quarantines (and, not surprisingly, rogue elements took opportunity to collect bribes from people to let them escape the quarantine zones. Some things never change).

In Egypt, the military -- which already dabbles in business -- is to lead in funding and working on the \$4 billion expansion of the Suez Canal. There will be a mega industrial and logistics hubs built around the expanded canal that will cost another \$4m. It has been awarded to a Bahrain registered firm, Dar Al-Handasah Egypt. The Egyptian army is the local partner in Dar Al-Handasah.

African armies are getting multi-skilled, making money, learning to work regionally and internationally. This gives them a knowledge base, resou  Recommend

networks that don't have to rely on civilian structures, and therefore great autonomy and ability to pursue pan-regionalism. What next? Will the Kenya-Uganda-Kenya armies take over the new railway to end the bickering? Will the regional armies standardise their equipment? Will they federate ahead of the politicians?

Well, this time we will be there to tell you.

The author is editor of Mail & Guardian Africa (mgafrica.com). Twitter:@cobbo3

COMMENT

One cuts your head off, the other won't pay you



IN SUMMARY

- We are seeing a double crisis — of thieving sectarian regimes that patriots aren't willing to defend, and rebels and militants who are killing off patriots without a plan for building for tomorrow.

Some thing strange — and terrible too — is happening to the business of soldiering, war, and general killing.

First, armies in West Africa just seem to drop their guns and run for the sand dunes (in Mali), or the tall grass (in Nigeria) when confronted by “Islamic” militants, themselves a new type of rebel.

In one of many such incidents, in May Malian soldiers fled the northern town of Kidal after heavy gun battles with Tuareg separatists. Last week, about 500 Nigerian troops hightailed into neighbouring Cameroon after clashes with Boko Haram militants in Borno State.

But perhaps the most infamous military collapse of recent times came from Iraq in June, when 30,000 government troops in the northern city of Mosul, with sophisticated American-supplied weapons, turned and took off when confronted by just 800 Islamic State militants!

Rebels and militants have changed their game; they have become more ruthless, and thrown away the book on fair treatment of prisoners of war (POW).

Islamic State executes its prisoners in the most gruesome way, and then posts the video on the Internet. A video released on the weekend by Boko Haram keeps to the same script. It shows executed captives, and in some scenes its men are seen beating prisoners to death with shovels.

POWs

Let's get this clear, war of any sort is horrible, as is being a POW. However, the treatment of prisoners of war tells a lot about their captors.

During World War II, the Japanese used forced civilian labour and Allied prisoners to build the Burma-Siam Railway, a 415-kilometre line between Bangkok, in Thailand, and Rangoon in Burma. It was also called the Death Railway for a good reason — nearly 90,000 Asian civilian labourers and Allied POWs died building it.

So, while both Boko Haram and Islamic State talk of setting up caliphates, they are not conventional state builders. They have no plans of building underground railways.

But perhaps even more concerning are the soldiers in countries like Mali and Nigeria who are paid to fight for the taxpayers. They are running away from barefooted rebels not because they are cowards, but because their relationship with the state is changing.

In Nigeria, when military wives protested, demanding that the government supply their husbands with good weapons to fight Boko Haram, one could sense that the militants had the advantage. Africa's largest economy, Nigeria can't kit out its army well enough to fight the militants.

Nigeria is not unique. Military camps — and police barracks — in many parts of Africa are in a terrible state. The money to build decent housing for police and troops is allocated in national budgets every year, but is stolen by the big men.

There have been reports of soldiers in some African countries buying their own uniforms from the second-hand clothes market!

In Iraq, former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki, presided over a very corrupt regime, and had dismantled the professional army leadership, stuffing it with his cronies and loyalists. The rest of the soldiers weren't willing to die for them.

So we are seeing a double crisis — of thieving sectarian regimes that patriots aren't willing to defend, and rebels and militants who are killing off patriots without a plan for building for tomorrow.

Charles Onyango-Obbo is editor of Mail & Guardian Africa (mgafrica.com). Twitter: @jacobho3

[Back to The East African: One cuts your head off, the other won't pay you](#) <URL: javascript:history.go(-1)>

COMMENT

This isn't the time to be a rebel, rebel-backer in East Africa



Three seemingly unconnected events came to pass in eastern Africa over the past four weeks.

The United Nations abandoned its ambiguous attitude toward the rebel Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), a Rwandan "Hutu" militia that includes perpetrators of the 1994 genocide based in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and seeks to overthrow the government in Kigali.

In early August the UN chief of mission in DRC warned that the FDLR must disarm or face military action. It is a hard line that the UN, perhaps because of its peacekeeping mission in DRC, had largely avoided.

The US special envoy to the Great Lakes region, Russ Feingold, was even firmer, calling for the FDLR to be flushed out, and arguing that it had no justification to demand negotiation with the Rwanda government — a position that had been championed by Tanzania. He demanded the group demobilize by "no later than end of the year."

Even Angola, that was thought to be the real firepower behind the "Tanzanian option" on FDLR, shifted position dramatically.

Angolan Defence Minister Joao Manuel Gonalves Lourenco, said he was "concerned by the slow progress of the voluntary surrender" of the FDLR.

The second event was the reversal of fortunes for South Sudan rebel leader Riek Machar. When South Sudan went up in flames in December, in power fight between President Salva Kiir and his former deputy Machar, whom he had sacked a few months earlier, the world and the regional grouping IGAD blamed the two sides almost equally for the ensuing atrocities. They also held them similarly culpable for the failure to enforce ceasefire agreements.

Indeed the view was that Ethiopia, and the US, were leaning toward Machar. In mid-August everyone turned against Machar, and everywhere he looked even formerly sympathetic leaders, were wagging fingers at him and casting him as the villain.

The third event was the US airstrike on a convoy in Somalia the other week that killed feared al Shabaab militant and terror leader Ahmad Abdi Godane.

So what has changed? In all probability, it is the success of the extremist groups. Until about three years ago, the "terror divide" was the Sahel and the tip of the Horn of Africa.

But extremist groups are prevailing in Libya, have taken root in Egypt, have spread further south into West Africa — Mali, Nigeria, the Nigeria-Cameroon border area, and even into Central African Republic (CAR).

The view had always been that extremists were pushing eastwards and Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda were the "frontline" states preventing them from linking up with the terrorists in Somalia through Sudan.

The westward sweep and successes means that the frontline has shifted, and now the most critical point defence line is in central Africa.

The new push against al Shabaab and the killing of Godane, presumably, is hoped to free up resources from the eastern flank and focus them in central Africa and toward West Africa.

In this new reality, Machar and FDLR are flies in the soup. Generally, it's not a good time to be a rebel or rebel-backer in East Africa. They are all being served as starters now. A year is, indeed, a very long time in politics.

Charles Onyango-Obbo is editor of Mail & Guardian Africa (mgofrica.com). Twitter: [@cobbo3](https://twitter.com/cobbo3)

[Back to The East African: This isn't the time to be a rebel, rebel-backer in East Africa <URL: javascript:history.go\(-1\)>](#)