

Boredom, Discontent Set In Among Kony Hunters

BY RODNEY MUHUMUZA
The Associated Press

DJEMA, Central African Republic — The hunt for alleged war criminal Joseph Kony is heating up on international radars, but Ugandan foot soldiers who have spent years searching for the man are starting to ask a question their top commanders prefer to ignore: Is it possible he is dead?

Ugandan army officials say the Lord's Resistance Army leader is alive and hiding somewhere within the Central African Republic. Rank-and-file soldiers, however, say intelligence on Kony is so limited that if he dies, or is already dead, his foes might never know and could wind up chasing a ghost through this vast Central Africa jungle.

In interviews last week with an Associated Press reporter who trekked with them in the jungle, soldiers in one of many Kony-hunting squads said their task in the Central African Republic could no longer be described as a manhunt. The soldiers, who requested anonymity for fear of punishment, said for years

there has been no LRA presence in the areas they patrol.

The soldiers are growing increasingly disillusioned, complaining of boredom and having to carry around heavy guns they never expect to use.

"Our commanders don't want you to know the truth," one of them said on the banks of the Vovodo river, his colleagues nodding in approval. "They want to keep us here, but up to now our squad has never come across any rebels."

Another soldier said: "We are bored. We have nothing to do. We are mobile every day but we never see the enemy."

Kony, an enigmatic rebel leader who has lived in the bush for the last 26 years, last month became the subject of intense international focus after U.S. advocacy group Invisible Children made a popular online video purporting to make him famous. He has been silent since 2008, when the Ugandan army raided his forested base in northeastern Congo.

Ugandan officials say Kony, who is wanted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes and crimes against humanity, fled to the Central African Re-

public hours before the aerial attack, but LRA attacks have been frequently reported in Congo recently. Ugandan troops left the Congo last year after Congolese authorities asked them to go.

Soldiers told the AP they should be in Congo for the hunt.

Ugandan officials say the LRA, which has no more than 200 men scattered in small groups all over Central Africa, is hard to eliminate completely because the jungle is where the rebels are most comfortable. Last year U.S. President Barack Obama sent 100 troops to help regional governments fight the LRA. The Americans play an advisory role in Uganda, the Congo, South Sudan and the Central African Republic, countries that have been affected by the LRA over the years.

Even in extremely dry spells, according to the accounts of Ugandan soldiers who have fought Kony since the 1990s, the rebels can survive on filtered clay, which they mix with honey and then roll into something that resembles a sausage. One piece is enough to satiate a man for several days. Ugandan soldiers call this concoction Kony's dry ration.

Col. Joseph Balikuddembe, the top Ugandan commander of the anti-Kony mission, said the war on the LRA cannot be rushed. To eliminate the rebels and their top leaders, he said, Ugandan troops must live like the rebels, on scant provisions, to catch them in the jungles.

But this method is a source of discontent among soldiers who are poorly paid — most earn about \$100 per month — and who feel that they are being used to justify an expensive war against a degraded rebel force that offers no resistance. Some openly wonder if Kony is still alive.

Their amusement comes from using their cell phones to watch pornography and charging the phones' batteries with solar panels during long treks. Otherwise, they are forced to walk miles every day through unforgiving terrain, facing jungle threats including crocodiles, elephants and poachers.

The makeshift clinic at a military base in Nzara, South Sudan, is packed with anti-malaria medication that will be spent when the rains fall and mosquitoes become rampant. The jungle experience

also demands personal sacrifice from the soldiers because they can't communicate with their families for months and then years, and sometimes go hungry.

In February, when supplies were slow in arriving, some members of a 60-member Kony-hunting squad tried and failed to eat a wild yam that is a favorite of the LRA's. It is called abato, and a mature one is about the size of a baby's folded hand.

"We tasted the yams and they were sour," said Ugandan Pvt. Godfrey Asimwe. "I don't know what the LRA do to those yams to make them edible and delicious. We hear they enjoy them."

And some soldiers, in an impossible test of endurance, are forced to walk on broken limbs.

Last Thursday, halfway through a 14-kilometer walk through the jungle, a soldier stumbled and fell badly. He tried to stay the course but eventually broke down and asked to be carried around. His colleagues resisted and he limped on. The next day he was bundled onto a military helicopter that also carried the stinking remains of a soldier killed in a crocodile attack on Wednesday.

Asteroids Could Yield Precious Metals, Cosmic Riches

BY DONNA BLANKINSHIP
AND SETH BORENSTEIN
Associated Press

SEATTLE — Using space-faring robots to mine precious metals from asteroids almost sounds easy when former astronaut Tom Jones describes it — practically like clearing a snow-covered driveway.

Jones, an adviser to a bold venture that aims to extract gold, platinum and rocket fuel from the barren space rocks, said many near-Earth asteroids have a loose rocky surface held together only weakly by gravity.

"It shouldn't be too hard to invent a machine like a snow blower to pick up material," explained

Jones, a veteran of four space shuttle missions.

But it will be risky and monstrously expensive, which is why some of the biggest and richest names in high-technology — including the barons of Google and filmmaker James Cameron — are behind the project.

If the plan gets off the ground as planned, robots could be extracting cosmic riches within 10 years.

Outside experts are skeptical because the program would probably require untold millions or perhaps billions of dollars, plus huge advances in technology. Yet the same entrepreneurs behind this idea also pioneered the selling of space rides to tourists — a

notion that seemed fanciful not long ago.

"Since my early teenage years, I've wanted to be an asteroid miner. I always viewed it as a glamorous vision of where we could go," Peter Diamandis, one of the founders of Planetary Resources Inc., told a news conference Tuesday at the Museum of Flight in Seattle. The company's vision "is to make the resources of space available to humanity."

The inaugural step, to be achieved in the next 18 to 24 months, would be launching the first in a series of private telescopes that would search for the right type of asteroids.

The proposal is to use commercially built robotic ships to

squeeze rocket fuel and valuable minerals out of the rocks that routinely whiz by Earth.

Several scientists not involved in the project said they were simultaneously thrilled and wary, calling the plan daring, difficult — and pricey. They don't see how it could be cost-effective, even with platinum and gold worth nearly \$1,600 an ounce. An upcoming NASA mission to return just 2 ounces (60 grams) of an asteroid to Earth will cost about \$1 billion.

The entrepreneurs of Planetary Resources have a track record of profiting from space ventures. Diamandis and co-founder Eric Anderson led the way in selling space rides to tourists, and Diamandis has a sep-

arate company that offers "weightless" airplane flights.

Investors and advisers to the new company include Google CEO Larry Page, Google Executive Chairman Eric Schmidt and Cameron, the man behind the Hollywood blockbusters "Titanic" and "Avatar."

Extracting water is key to deep space exploration, as well as for driving costs down, Anderson said. The water can be converted into fuel by separating the hydrogen and oxygen. On a manned flight, it could also be used for drinking and growing food.

The plan is to take water from an asteroid to a spot in space where it can be broken down into fuel. From there, it can easily and

cheaply be shipped to Earth orbit for refueling commercial satellites or spaceships from NASA and other countries.

Anderson acknowledged the many potential pitfalls.

"There will be times when we fail," he said. "There will be times when we have to pick up the pieces and try again."

The mining, fuel processing and later refueling would all be done without humans, Anderson said.

The target-hunting telescopes would be tubes only a couple of feet long, weighing only a few dozen pounds and small enough to be held in your hand. They should cost less than \$10 million, company officials said.

Obama

From Page 1

supporter of the nonprofit, and his daughter, Susie Buffett, serves on Girls Inc.'s board. Warren Buffett sat with his wife and daughter at a front-row table on Tuesday.

Obama later appeared at a private fundraiser in the Des Moines area and headlined a rally for campaign volunteers and supporters in a community center at a suburban park.

She ticked through President Barack Obama's signature accomplishments, including the 2009 federal stimulus package and 2010 health care legislation. She credited the Democratic incumbent's administration with easing the economic downturn that met him when he took office.

Yet, she warned supporters that the general election would be close. Iowa, which Obama carried in 2008, is among about a dozen states expected to be among the most closely contested in November. The president plans to campaign in Iowa City on Wednesday.

"Understand with every door you knock on, with every call you make, with every conversation you have, this could be the one that makes the difference," she told about 400 people during her 20-minute talk. "Treat it that way."

Obama encouraged Girls Inc. supporters in the audience to keep believing in girls and giving them the confidence they need to be themselves.

"You're not just giving them something to do. You're giving them something to be," Obama said.

Before Obama's speech, several members of Girls Inc. talked

about what the programs have meant to them. A video the girls produced also showed some of the tutoring and social activities with an emphasis on activity because Obama promotes fitness and healthy eating.

The lunch event's master of ceremonies, Rhaniece Choice, 20, said she was impressed by Obama's personable manner.

"She was just so down-to-earth," said Choice, who is now a sophomore at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. "She just wanted to get to know us backstage on a personal level."

Chanecia Martin, 15, who introduced Obama, said she was

impressed by how cool the first lady seemed.

"It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience," Martin said.

Obama told all the young girls in the audience that she tells her two daughters that they have to practice who they want to be every single day. But she said it helps to have some strong supporters in your corner when you go after dreams.

"Focus on the people in your life who give you positive reinforcement," she said. "Gravitate toward the positive. Stay away from the 'haters.'"



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