

Uganda: Big U.S. Military Exercise for Northern Region

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Nairobi: More than 1,000 American and East African troops are to be deployed in northern Uganda next week as the United States carries out its biggest military exercise in Africa this year.

Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi are each sending up to 150 soldiers to join 450 US military personnel in Kitgum for the October 16-25 exercise known as Natural Fire 10.

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[T]he decision to site the exercise in northern Uganda raises questions about whether it may presage a renewed US-supported assault against the Lord's Resistance Army.

Natural Fire 10 will involve live fire in the field as well as convoy operations, crowd control and vehicle checkpoints, the US Army reports.

And while Maj Gen William B. Garrett III insisted recently that the exercise is focused on training for humanitarian relief, the US Army commander added that the forces he will lead in Natural Fire 10 will be ready to respond to any security threat that may arise in the Kitgum region.

The Obama administration is being urged by dozens of Democratic and Republican members of Congress to help finish the fight against the LRA.

Several non-governmental organisations based in the US also advocate US military action to put an end to the maraudings of the LRA.

The US provided operational support to a joint Ugandan-DR Congo-Southern Sudan offensive last December that was aimed at capturing or killing LRA leader Joseph Kony....

But the operation dubbed Lightning Thunder failed in its objectives.

Kony escaped, and his forces embarked on a killing spree that took the lives of an estimated 1,000 Congolese villagers.

Natural Fire 10 may well have the primary purposes claimed for it, but the skills being taught to the East African soldiers "are readily transferable to any sort of operations that their commanders want to undertake," notes Daniel Volman, head of the Washington-based, non-governmental African Security Research Project.

The exercise in northern Uganda is scheduled to begin one week after the conclusion of another US-led military exercise in Gabon.

Nearly 30 African nations – including Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda – took part in that communications-focused initiative led by the US Africa Command.

According to Africom, the Africa Endeavour exercise sought to establish a network linking African armies' command and control structures in order to better prepare for joint operations.

Africom is also playing a co-ordination role in Natural Fire 10, which is being conducted by the US Army's Africa unit based in Italy.

Together, these exercises are cited by Africom's critics as further indications of what they describe as the growing militarisation of the US presence in Africa.

Situating the exercise in Uganda reflects the close military relationship that the United States has developed with that East African country, Volman says.

He suggests that Washington also appreciates President Yoweri Museveni's demonstrated willingness to "face down any criticisms" that may arise in response to Uganda's hosting of a large-scale, US-led military exercise.

Supplies for Natural Fire 10 have been sent by ship to Mombasa and then moved overland into Uganda.

The equipment includes three CH-47 Chinook helicopters that the US typically uses for troop movements and battlefield supply operations.

In an experiment to be conducted during Natural Fire 10, the helicopters will be equipped with a route-reconnaissance device that normally operates on the ground.

The US Army says that planned test flights of the device are intended to provide forces on the ground with real-time aerial views of roads and bridges in order to help make faster, better-informed decisions on transportation routes.

Worries persist in Africa that the Pentagon intends to station large numbers of US troops on the continent, despite denials by Africom's leaders that such a move is being planned.

The United States already maintains about 2,000 troops at a base in Djibouti.

This Joint Task Force/Horn of Africa detachment is the source of some of the US soldiers, sailors and Marines who will participate in Natural Fire 10.

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