

# THE Africa Dispatch

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## Uganda riots explode after political arrest



All photos by Peter Waldron

**Above:** People run to avoid being hit by police vehicle. **Top:** Police in riot gear arrive ready to confront crowds. **Below:** A Ministry of Justice vehicle is but one of many cars burning in Kampala streets.

By Peter Waldron

December 2005

**UNTIL THE RECENT ARREST OF FORUM FOR DEMOCRATIC CHANGE (FDC) LEADER AND PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE RETIRED COL. DR. KIZZA BESIGYE, IT HAD BEEN A LONG TIME SINCE I HAD WITNESSED RIOTING IN URBAN STREETS.**

I remember the race riots in Northeast Washington, D.C., in April 1968. I drove from Ft. Lee, Virginia, which is just south of Richmond, to see firsthand what happened. I had heard a report on the radio that activist Stokely Carmichael was forcing shops to close as a sign of respect for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who was murdered the night before in Memphis, Tennessee. I saw smoke billowing into the air over the nation's capital as I approached the city. I had to park near the Smithsonian Institution and walk the rest of the way. I was



wearing my Army uniform, so I was not stopped by the police, National Guard, or other Army soldiers. I first saw broken glass on sidewalks and saw one or two gangs of young men and women kicking in doors and throwing trash cans through windows. Then, there are the memories of soldiers in olive green fatigues, driving jeeps and trucks back and forth on 14<sup>th</sup> Street, and around Georgetown. I still see those squads of U.S. Marines setting up machine guns on the Capitol steps. And soldiers from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry guarding the White House. It was at the same time both thrilling and deeply depressing.

In Chicago in August 1968, I watched cloud upon cloud of tear gas fill the streets during the Democratic National Convention. Chicago Mayor Richard Daley had ordered the police to control the thousands of demonstrators gathered in Lincoln Park and Grant Park and outside the McCormack Place Convention Center. Cops on horses, police wearing helmets and carrying batons and shields pushing and shoving kids around and onto the ground. I stopped one policeman from beating a girl my age laying in a fetal position on the street. He looked at me when I grabbed his arm and he turned and just walked away. My worldview was changed a little because of what I witnessed those nights and days.

I remember when Resurrection City was built on both sides of the Reflecting Pool between the Lincoln Memorial and Washington Monument and how the



Police waiting for reinforcements before striking.

police tried to manage the thousands of poor, civil rights activists, Hippies, and Yippies. At the time, I was an Army adviser to the Virginia National Guard that waited on “our” side of the Potomac River for trouble to erupt.

Neither shall I forget the Chicago Seven antiwar demonstration on the Mall in Washington, D.C. A friend and I watched truck upon trucks of Army soldiers pull inside and park in government-building courtyards that are between the White House and Mall area.

But most of the Western world knows protests, street fights, and riots through Hollywood depictions, or from international news channels like CNN, Sky News, or the BBC. As horrifying as is the

TV news footage of mob violence, it cannot compare to being in the midst of the battle. The smells, the sounds, the looks of anger, fear, and fierceness in a person’s eyes aren’t properly communicated in print, or radio, or on TV. To be there is to maximize and energize all of one’s senses—but I don’t recommend it or advise anyone to go for the sake of curiosity. It is dangerous, particularly if you don’t have a “side,” because there is no neutral ground.

### A Uganda reality check

So I found myself once again awestruck by riots in Kampala that paralyzed the city for a week during November. I saw shops closed, vehicle traffic stopped, and vacant streets. Seldom did anyone venture outside, unless they were part of the rioting crowds. A bustling, vibrant city of color, life, and activity had ground to a halt.

Once the gunshots began, terrorized Kampalans ran helter-skelter for safety. Police fired volleys of tear gas at the rioters, spewing clouds of white smoke that rose and spread like a tablecloth across the masses fleeing the streets. As the people ran, their faces became awash with tears from the gas, only adding to their terror.

The popping sound of tear gas shells exploding out of their launchers, the clank of metal skipping across the hard pavement and the eruption of the tear gas vapors sent shudders down my spine, shattering any sense of security and safety. Kampala was caught in a time warp



Left: UPDF Military Police arrive. Right: Military Police bring heavy ordnance.

and thrown back to 20 to 30 years ago. The optimistic vision for prosperity, an emerging market economy, an investor's Mecca, and jobs for our friends and neighbors was broken like an egg against the side of an iron skillet.

Next came the rubber bullets. They both sting like the end of a leather whip, and hit like the hard punch of a heavy-weight boxer, staggering grown men, doubling up a woman nearby, who collapses from the pain.

Before my eyes, I saw the grand capital city of Uganda plunged into a confusion and chaos that had been absent from its streets for more than two decades. For a moment, I wondered if, soon after, there would be bloodshed as in Uganda's neighbor, Sudan, or as what our many friends in West Africa are experiencing, or even a flash-of-a-thought that the Rwanda horror of 1994 would also fill the streets of this, my adopted home. Political strongmen wrestling for power with automatic weapons, child soldiers, tribal prejudices, and century-old hatreds. "For what?" I asked myself. "To bring one's own brand of corruption to the government?"

The 12:45 p.m. arrest of Dr. Besigye in Busega, a Kampala suburb, had triggered protests. Besigye's angry supporters and other enraged citizens quickly engaged the undermanned Anti-Riot Police in daylong battles. The police were fighting on two fronts—Makarere University also was disruptive and required police control. When matters got out of hand for both the Anti-Riot and regular Police backed by Special Police constables, commanders called in the heavily armed Military Police, with their "Mambas" (heavy armored military vehicles).

The arrival of the dreaded Mambas caused more pandemonium, as crowds fled from before them, trying to avoid being run over and avoiding the police batons swinging at their heads. The police slapped, poked, and beat those who could not run fast enough, or who had the courage to try to face them down. Blood streamed down countless faces and heads, soaking shirts and blouses in crimson red.



Kampala citizens run for their lives.

Still, the chaos continued on Kampala and Jinja Roads, and on Luwum, Burton, Dastur, and Johnson Streets, where the irate mob engaged the police and vandalized property. Rioters and fleeing civilians smashed the concrete flowerpots,

destroying the city's efforts to add beauty to its mundane streets.

Civil servants, traders, and schoolchildren were stranded as taxi and boda-boda (motor bike) drivers shunned the city center or were turned away, thus paving the way for massive traffic jams on the roads leading from the heart of the city.

Hundreds, if not thousands, of commuters and schoolchildren were forced to walk, battling the sting of tear gas, as they trudged along. The sounds of men yelling, women screaming, can be disorienting and threatening to a child or a senior citizen. I saw a sea of frightened faces longing for the peace and safety they hoped to find if and when they reached home.

Thick plumes of smoke from burning government vehicles, kiosks, and tires spiraled into the sky. The rioters torched one of the red sedan cars owned by the Ministry of Justice, parked on William Street, reducing it to smoldering metal and a hot steel shell. The rioters had torched at least four other Ugandan government cars.

Rioters looted the Giant Eagles shop on Wilson Road and at Arua Park. The crowd ignited old tires as police began spraying them with two anti-riot armored water cannons, followed by yet more tear gas. Businessmen locked up their shops



People raise hands as riot police run towards them.



Vehicles set ablaze to protest arrest of President's main opponent in 2006 election.



Left: Supporters wait at Central Police Station for Dr. Besigye, Right: Dr. Besigye arrives with heavy police escort.

in haste, fleeing for their lives. Yet, that did not safeguard their goods. According to Kampala Deputy Police Chief Gabriel Tibayungwa, a private security guard shot and killed a man who tried to loot a closed shop on Wilson Road. Police arrested several others who had attempted to loot shops whose windows had been broken and doors torn from their hinges.

Once news of Besigye's arrest had

spread, thousands of his angry supporters jammed city streets. They rushed to the Central Police Station (CPS) where police intended to question Besigye. As they waited, they chanted pro-Besigye songs.

Many of Besigye's supporters were, however, repulsed by the Anti-Riot Police, who fired volleys of gunshots in the air and lobbed one tear gas canister after another at the determined crowd. Those

who had gathered because of their concern for the arrested Presidential candidate now had to deal with their own safety and welfare. Chaos erupted as the heavily armed police convoy bearing Besigye approached the CPS.

The police had a hard time keeping the mob at bay all the way from Busega. It took them more than two-and-a-half hours to get to CPS, a journey that should take about 20 minutes.

Besigye finally arrived at CPS at 3:13 p.m. and witnessed the chaotic scene of gunshots and angry protesters. He, too, reacted to the air that was now spiced with tear gas. Yet, despite the physical abuse and police threats, some party faithful still clung precariously to his car.

Besigye emerged from his car 24 minutes later and police led him to room #62, where they interrogated him for a short time. The police then smuggled him out of the building through a small gate in the rear of the building, moving him to the nearby Buganda Road Court.

By Monday night, riot police and soldiers made regular security runs in the city center, crisscrossing the streets in patrol trucks, and on Mambas. These men arrested civilians who walked the sidewalks at night looking to fill prescriptions for sick children or to buy a loaf of



Above left: Military Police take control of foot traffic near High Court. Above right: Diplomatic corps based in Kampala observe court proceedings. Top left: In court, Dr. Besigye signals supporters that he is okay. Top right: Dr. Besigye gives impromptu interview in court to press.

bread for their family. Each of those arrested was charged with “being idle and disorderly.”

Violence erupted again the next day and continued as prosecutors charged Dr. Besigye and 22 others with treason. Most shops, banks, and offices in the city center and some foreign missions remained closed. Rioters set ablaze another vehicle and vandalized more property, defying the heightened security.

Rioters burned a minibus along William Street, and torched an MTN kiosk along Dastur Street. Red Cross rescue workers busily lifted the injured onto stretchers.

The Kampala riots had threatened to send the entire nation into chaos. Arua, Soroti, and Rukungiri were also protesting and required a police presence. Word of mouth moves quickly, and radio reports interrupted regularly scheduled broadcasts to report updates on the violence in the capital.

### Lady Justice raped

In what looked like a scene from a cheap Bollywood film, at about 2:45 p.m., 30 men, armed with automatic weapons and dressed in black T-shirts and green camouflage army trousers, stormed the high court quadrangle in Kampala. This well-coordinated tactical deployment came at the same time that High Court Justice Edmund Lugazizi declared that the men arrested with Dr. Besigye’s on treason charges had a constitutional right to be released on bail.

The armed men, who looked like a Special Weapons Assault Team in a James Bond movie, took strategic positions on the court’s premises. I noticed that two men whom I had seen before were directing or leading the armed men. One was called “Drani” and the other Lt. Opolot. The irony here is that both are members of the Presidential Guard Brigade (PGB). Their troops later tried to force their way into the court’s holding cells, where the suspects were being held. Gasps of shock and terror



Drani led the armed men

swept through the crowd outside the court like a wind through tall grass in a Kenya savannah. Nothing like this had ever happened before—justice was kidnapped and Lady Justice stripped naked by a special operations unit. I couldn’t believe what I saw!

For a time, these commandos held the High Court hostage. The men appeared to be Israeli-trained Uganda government special forces. Whether they were police or members of the Ugandan Military Defense Force is still in dispute, but what is clear is that these were not children pretending to be soldiers. They were an elite unit trained to conduct rapid deployment operations—to strike fast, hit hard, and get out.

An army spokesman said the men were deployed by the Uganda People’s Defense Forces, but later the Minister of Defense reportedly said that he would



Above left: Diplomats demand an explanation for Black Mamba’s presence. Above right: Black Mambas surround High Court. Top: Black Mambas storm the High Court.

“give anyone one million shillings if one could prove that the UPDF had a ‘Black Mamba’ unit” (a name given to the group by the media because of the black T-shirts). The UPDF spokesman claimed that the unit’s mission was to rearrest the suspects whose bail applications were being considered. The defense forces, he said, had established that the men had violated army law, that some were deserted army officers, while others were civilians who were found with arms.

The army awaited the conclusion of the civilian court process before rearresting them to be retried by an army court-martial.

In an unprecedented move, military personnel were again deployed at the High Court the next day.

### Diplomats pushed around

The entire nation sat shocked at the sight of foreign diplomats, including American Charge d’Affaires William Fitzgerald, being steered around by the army forces. Fitzgerald and the others had come to

observe the High Court proceedings, but the commandos gathered them up and herded them like cattle into the parking lot. Observers watched as these dignitaries dialed their cell phones, consulting with other officials to form a strategy. Then they huddled in the parking lot, trying to formulate a plan.

At the general court-martial a few days later, UPDF Gen. Elly Tumwine, who chaired the court-martial proceedings, ordered a Danish diplomat out of the courtroom. The Danish Ambassador, who represented most of the foreign diplomatic corps in Uganda, attempted to explain that he had received permission from the Minister of Foreign Affairs to attend and observe the proceedings. He was allowed into the courtroom, but his fellow diplomats were prohibited from entering the gate at the Makindye Military Barracks. The general summarily dismissed the Dane's credentials, saying the Minister's permission had no standing in a military court.

**Two roads but one choice**

*Two roads diverged in a wood,  
and I—*

*I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference*

—Robert Frost

Uganda, Uganda, my beloved Uganda, blessed of God, is at a critical intersection in history. History is the written or oral record of human behavior. Colonization by foreign governments, exploitation by large consortiums of men and businesses and the epic struggle for independence and the creation of sovereign national governments are



**Above: Diplomats locked out of military court martial. Below: Diplomats discuss next steps.**



epoch events in African history. But the decisions made in Uganda during the weeks and months to come will make the other epoch events in Africa pale in comparison.

Great nations exist because of great institutions not individuals. Great institutions exist because of a great constitution. And a great constitution exists because principled men and women sacrifice their personal ambition and agendas to work toward consensus and through compromise for that which is in the best interest of the people today and in the future. Law, in simple terms, establishes reasonable boundaries, defines what is right and what is wrong, and establishes standards of acceptable public and private behavior.

Historical sub-Saharan Africa and historical Uganda are one and the same—different names, different European

monarchies, and different exploiters of natural resources, but, in general, the same methodology of transition: independence, coup, murder or imprisonment of opponents, a new constitution, new government, etc. An endless cycle of independence, coup, new government, coup, etc.

Uganda can make history by traveling a path that American poet Robert Frost called “the one less traveled”—“And,” he continues, “that has made all the difference.”

The rioting, taking the High Court hostage, publicly disrespecting foreign diplomats, and imprisoning one's political opponent are either an apparition or the beginning of another Africa-specific cycle of needless poverty, disease, civil unrest, and corruption. This must not happen.

Common sense is no longer common. It doesn't take a constitution to do the right thing. Commonwealth countries and British-trained politicians like to quote the law in public statements and in their writings, but it is common sense that is needed, not common law. Reasonable men and reasonable women (and we have so many) must rise up in Uganda. They must choose between doing the right thing or grasping the baton of self-destruction from the folks in West Africa or our neighbors Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, or, farther north, Somalia and Ethiopia.

I pray that Uganda takes the “less traveled path.” This means releasing the good doctor from prison and having a fair, free, and open election. Let the best man or woman (Mama Miria Obote, the late President's wife, is a candidate) win. If someone other than the current President wins, let there be a peaceful transition of government, and let the new leadership continue the valiant effort begun 20 years ago by gallant men and women to build a new nation, with a new vision, and with a new destiny. ■

*Peter Waldron is a freelance journalist and photographer.*

THE AfricaDispatch  
 Publisher . . . . .Dr. Peter E. Waldron  
 Editor . . . . .Robert Selle  
 Designer . . . . .Claude Aubert  
 Printing . . . . .Times Color Graphics  
 Email: theafricadispatch@yahoo.co.uk