



## A Reflection on Uganda's Foreign Policy and Role at the UN Security Council



### Synthesis Report of the Proceedings of the 5<sup>th</sup> State of the Nation Platform

February 5, 2010, Kampala – Uganda

Bernard Tabaire  
Jackie Okao

**ACODE Public Dialogue Series No. 9, 2010**



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## List of Acronyms

ACOD	Advocates Coalition for Development and Environment
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
EAC	East Africa Community
ICC	International Criminal Court
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MP	Member of Parliament
NRM	National Resistance Movement
STON	State of the Nation
TFG	Transitional Federal Government
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UPDF	Uganda People’s Defense Forces
US	United States
TTI	Thin Tank Initiative
OAU	Organization for African Union

## INTRODUCTION

Uganda is a landlocked country that depends on foreign imports for most of its consumer goods and energy requirements. Thus, even before independence, maintaining an open trade route to the Indian Ocean was a primary foreign policy objective. Indeed, in the first decade of independence, policymakers emphasised co-operation with Uganda's neighbours. At continental level, it assumed a pan-Africanist stance, being a founding member of the Organisation of African Unity (now African Union) and a strong supporter of liberation movements especially in southern Africa. On the global stage, the country maintained a posture of non-alignment although it sometimes sided more with the communist/socialist bloc led by the then-Soviet Union and China. All the while, however, the country acted in such a way as to protect and expand its foreign trade and to continue getting foreign assistance.

The country's foreign policy would generally change with the emergence of Idi Amin in 1971. Amin's aggressive ways – claiming a part of Kenyan territory in contravention of the OAU treaty and the later invasion of Tanzania, just to name two immediate examples – damaged the country's international standing and eventually cost him his job when the Tanzanians led a war that ousted him in 1979.

When the NRM came to power in 1986, the new government enthusiastically supported international and especially African co-operation but conditioned it on an ideological evaluation of whether other regimes were racist, dictatorial, corrupt, or violators of human rights. In a new assertiveness, Uganda actively supported the overthrow of governments in Rwanda and D.R. Congo (then Zaire) because they were dictatorial, corrupt, and abused human rights. An early exchange of fire at the border with Kenya and active support of the southern Sudanese in their fight for self-determination, a policy act carried over from the Obote and Amin regimes, had Uganda being viewed with hostile eyes all around the eastern African region. Much of that has since changed, with the country now making international news not for war mongering but for plans by some members of Parliament to hang homosexuals under a law now working its way through the legislature.

But Uganda may yet find itself being compelled to get belligerent. Events in the Sudan may force the country's hand. If South Sudan votes in a referendum (provided for in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005) next year to secede, thus splitting the Sudan into two, a civil war may once again erupt. That will likely force Uganda to intervene on the side of the South, hence setting up a military confrontation with oil-rich Khartoum.

That would be a confrontation with serious implications for East Africa, especially Uganda and Kenya. Also, the refusal by the Sudan and Egypt to sign a framework agreement setting up a River Nile basin commission in the wake of disagreements with seven other members (including Uganda) regarding water rights may bring about consequences Uganda will have to deal with.

To have a serious foreign policy, however, a country must be stable. One would say Uganda is stable, which is why it is now sitting on the UN Security Council as a non-permanent member for the years 2009 and 2010. Indeed, that was the starting point of Dr Ruhakana Rugunda's discussion of foreign policy at the 5th State of the Nation platforms.



*Guest Speaker: Ambassador Ruhakana Rugunda (left) delivering a key note address during the 5th session of the State of the Nation platform at Protea Hotel in Kampala on February 5, 2010. Taking notes is Godber Tumushabe, the Executive Director of ACODE*

Other than Sudan and the proposed anti-homosexuality law, other issues discussed and presented in this brief include the impact on foreign policy of Uganda's discovery of oil, the UPDF's peacekeeping operations in Somalia, regional integration, and the rise of China and India.

## **National Stability**

A country's internal strength is crucial in shaping the role it plays on the international scene. More democratic, more developed and more stable countries tend to advance their national interest – out of which emerge foreign policy positions – better.

Generally, the Executive arm of the state defines the national interest – the country's goals and ambitions. Because the national interest, and therefore foreign policy, is rooted in a country's domestic policy, one assumes that the people do have some say in defining the national interest as they elect the government of the day partly based on its domestic agenda. Dr Rugunda said Ugandans want stability and economic development – to boost their education, their environment – irrespective of political affiliation. Beyond those broad aspirations, he said, there may be variations in what constitutes aspects of the national interest.

Uganda, being one of only 44 landlocked countries in the world, cannot develop fast enough without co-operating with other countries, especially neighboring countries. Co-

operation with other African countries is, indeed, Point Number 9 on the ruling NRM's Ten-Point Programme developed during the Bush War of 1981-1986. Despite ups and downs, Dr Rugunda said, relations with DR Congo and Sudan are on the mend. With Kenya, Tanzania and Rwanda, relations are good.

Our [foreign policy] vision is Africa-centric, declared Dr Rugunda, who as president of the National Union of Students of Uganda in 1970 helped organize student protests against the resumption of arms sales by Britain to apartheid South Africa. "Uganda has had many governments but they have generally associated themselves with pan-Africanism," he said. The best example of Dr Rugunda's point is Sudan. It is the one country about which successive Ugandan governments since independence have been consistent. They have all given material and moral support to the people of Southern Sudan as they have fought back against real and perceived over-lordship from the Arab North.

### **Southern Sudan Referendum and the ICC Indictment of President Bashir**

Should the people of Southern Sudan vote in a scheduled referendum next year to secede from the Sudan, as we know it today, Kampala's relations with Khartoum may sour. Dr Rugunda seemed to acknowledge as much in saying: "This is of great concern to

[Uganda] because we are beneficiaries. We need to support Sudanese to solve their problems – to have peaceful elections and referendum." Southern Sudan is proving a lucrative business destination for Ugandan businesses. Close to \$260 million (about Sh508 billion) worth of goods was traded between Uganda and Southern Sudan in 2009 compared to \$60 million in 2006. This trade is almost entirely in favour of Uganda. Any resumption of armed conflict between the North and the South of Sudan in the likely event of secession will jeopardize this favourable economic activity. Uganda, and possibly Kenya as well, will throw its weight behind the South for historical reasons and also because an independent "Republic of Southern Sudan" would be a boom for Ugandan and Kenyan businesses for a long time to come.

The situation just described may get worse, or not, depending on Uganda's stance regarding the International Criminal Court's indictment of Sudan's President Hassan al-Bashir for war crimes (2 counts) and crimes against humanity (5 counts) stemming from his government's actions and inactions in the Darfur region. The UN Security Council referred the Bashir case to the ICC. "Uganda's view is that the case should be deferred so that political means can be used to help sort out the problems in the Sudan," Dr Rugunda said. "Hurrying to indict Bashir, instead of being a solution,



*Members of the platform listening attentively to Ambassador Ruhakana Rugunda delivering a speech on Uganda's Foreign Policy on February 5, 2010*

could end up being a problem. We think the Mbeki report proposals are a more realistic way forward." A central proposal of the Mbeki panel, established by the African Union in the wake of the ICC indictment, is a hybrid criminal court made up of Sudanese and foreign judges to try people accused of committing serious crimes in Darfur. Uganda's position so far favours Bashir.

**UPDF Peacekeeping Operations in Somalia**

Beyond Sudan, Uganda's Africa-centric vision is being lived out in Somalia. The Uganda Peoples Defences Forces have maintained a contingent of about 1,600 (some reports

indicate that number has since doubled) peacekeepers in that country since March 2007. Apart from treating the sick, the Ugandans, and the Burundians who joined them later, are essentially backing up the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) in the hope that it can establish national authority for meaningful political dialogue to take place. "We are in Somalia not for pecuniary reasons but to stand side by side to help Somalis rebuild their country given the turmoil of 20 years," Dr. Rugunda said. "We went there because we are implementing an African Union decision that is consistent with our pan-Africanism."

Pan-Africanism or not the following concerns need addressing:



*Edmond Owor and Dr. Peter Mwesige listening in while Bernard Tabaire (Right) taking notes of the proceedings*

- Countries such as Ghana and Nigeria that promised troops have not sent them three years on without clear explanation. This absence has stretched the Ugandans and Burundians, sometimes exposing them to deadly attacks by militants.
- Despite the presence of the peacekeepers, militants, especially the al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Shabaab, are increasing attacks on various targets and gaining ground in the process.
- Despite the presence of the peacekeepers, again, the TFG has not imposed national authority and a political solution to the conflict is nowhere near.
- With al-Shabaab threatening to attack Kampala, did Uganda make a mistake in sending troops to Somalia?

Given the above concerns, what is Uganda's withdrawal plan? To this point, Dr Rugunda once again invoked the Ugandan leadership's pan-Africanism that has also seen Ugandan soldiers, and police and prisons officers serve in Liberia and Southern Sudan over the years. "That is why we are training Somalis here in the police and the military," he said. That was another way of saying Uganda has no withdrawal plan. It should, and must, develop one. Uganda cannot be a permanent peacekeeper in Somalia.

### **Uganda on the UN Security Council**

A significant moment for Uganda so far as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council has had to do with Somalia. A resolution it

sponsored against Eritrea for its role in Somalia and Djibouti was supported by 13 of the 15 members of the UN Security Council. Libya opposed it while China, a permanent member with veto power, abstained. The resolution was a result of two concerns, Dr Rugunda said. (A) There are credible reports that some of the foreign fighters and arms in Somalia pass through Eritrea. (B) Part of Djibouti is occupied by Eritrean troops. The Security Council asked Eritrea to withdraw within six weeks but a year later, Eritrea had not complied. It was, therefore, important for the international community to show disapproval on both points. Consequently, Resolution 1907 (2009) stipulating an arms embargo, travel restrictions, asset freezes on Eritrea was carried on December 23, 2009. But the irony here cannot be missed. In supporting one African country (Somalia), Uganda has alienated another African country (Eritrea). Uganda and Eritrea, unlike Uganda and Somalia, were once very close

allies. It is worth noting that Eritrea and Ethiopia, who have gone to war once before in a border dispute, are on opposite sides in Somalia. Which begs the question: What are Uganda's real calculations in the Horn beyond reiterating its do-good pan-Africanism?

This (January 2009-December 2010) is the third time Uganda is sitting on the UN Security Council. The first was in the 1960s with Apollo Kironde as permanent representative. The second time was 1981-1982 when Mr. Olara Otunnu, now the Uganda Peoples Congress presidential candidate, was the ambassador. According to Dr Rugunda, the Security Council is an important forum where a member country, especially a miniscule power such as Uganda, enjoys some benefits. Such a country:

- Influences decisions directly, say, on appointments and deployments.

*A section of the platform members during the 5<sup>th</sup> session of the State of the Nation platform dialogue on 5/2/2010*



- Enhances its stature in bilateral relations.
- Gets courted by big powers, especially in search of votes for resolutions, and also courts them back to advance its interests.
- Plays a greater role generally than non-members. Indeed, Uganda used its seat to successfully push the anti-Eritrea resolution.

## The East African Community

In discussing the East African Community, the opportunity was missed to focus on Uganda's place in the regional body. Polls have generally showed Ugandans to be supportive of the Community and President Museveni wants an East African Federation as quickly as possible. But it would still have been useful to know whether the people present at the discussion shared that enthusiasm and what they thought the pitfalls, if any, were. When the question of Uganda's discovery of oil came up, Dr Rugunda said, without elaboration: "Oil will add a new dimension to the regional situation." Could it mean that a wealthy Uganda will go slow on deeper regional integration or could it mean that it will use its newfound wealth to bully other members into faster integration and on other matters as well? After all, even without oil money and power, Uganda was mightily punching above its weight regionally. How about relations with oil-exporting Sudan, and with DR Congo, a turbulent neighbour with whom Uganda shares some oil

deposits? If the EAC fails again, what is Uganda's Plan B?

On the question of member states not ceding powers to the EAC secretariat in Arusha, Dr Rugunda urged caution because the initial attempt collapsed in 1977. "I would rather go a little slow [because] once bitten, twice shy," he said in apparent contradiction to President Museveni's position of fast-tracked integration.

## The Rise of China and India

China and India are the talk of the world. Both countries, China especially, want resources to power their expanding economies and feed their huge and prospering populations. After officials of the China National Offshore Oil Corp met President Museveni in January, it is almost a given that they will partner with Tullow Oil, but with a focus on downstream development of the oil: refining, exporting. China's long courting of Uganda – providing grants to build office blocks for ministries, among other things, for example – may be on the verge of paying off. With even bigger projects in other African countries, China is steadily spreading its presence, and possibly influence, across the continent.

In Dr Rugunda's view, the best way for small countries such as Uganda to deal with China and India is to do so as blocs, for instance as the East African Community. "The rise of blocs," he said, "will give rise to more

meaningful foreign policy because we will have more in material and human resources. We need closer co-operation to also be able to protect our resources.” But the two Asian powers also offer useful examples as well. “Fifty years ago, these countries were laughed at,” the ambassador said. “Not any more. India was unable to feed itself until the Green Revolution. Let’s take lessons.”

### **The Anti-Homosexuality Bill, 2009**

While addressing the national executive committee of his party in January, President Museveni advised MPs to go slow on the Anti-Homosexuality Bill. The President said it was a “foreign policy issue”.

Ambassador Rugunda picked up from there. He said the Bill was not the most important thing Uganda should be discussing now. That it was crucial to take into account concerns of local people and international conventions on respect for human rights. However, he did not say how this balance could be achieved. “My own advice and view is: Uganda should correctly choose its priorities and should not be allowed to be diverted into issues which may not have direct impact on the ordinary person. Let us talk about improving

agriculture, fixing potholes.”

The exhortation did not settle the issue as it cropped up again prompting Dr Rugunda’s sharpest response of the morning. “We have to be ruthlessly candid,” he said. “There is no need to be reckless and put the country in more problems instead of helping it. Even powerful countries take into account other countries’ interests. It is insular to ignore other countries’ views. This Bill has united two international lobbies against Uganda. There are those that do not accept the death penalty. So in raising [the death penalty in the Bill], irrespective of the issues, you have mobilized the whole of Europe against yourself [because the death penalty is banned in all European Union countries]. Then there is the gay lobby. It is crucial to not ignore these two lobbies. Uganda does so at its own peril. We shall encounter resistance. Our closest friends [in the United States Congress] are embarrassed. Our development agenda should not be hijacked over this [Bill]. We should not fight phantom wars.”

Just hours before Ambassador Rugunda spoke, US President Barack Obama had described the Bill as “odious” at a prayer breakfast in Washington DC attended by politicians and religious leaders. He said it was “unconscionable

to target gays and lesbians for who they are". Homosexuality is actually illegal in Uganda and a guilty person can serve up to 14 years in jail.

According to Dr Rugunda, who also has served as minister for internal affairs and for foreign affairs, Uganda's name is respected internationally because

of the gains the country has made in turning itself around. The Anti-Homosexuality Bill, 2009, brought by Ndoorwa West MP David Bahati as a private member's Bill, does nothing to help that image. In any case, it is now clear what President Museveni meant when he said the proposed law was a foreign policy issue.

## Annex: List of Participants

NO	NAME	CONTACTS & E-MAIL ADDRESS
1.	Hussein R. Kashilling Law Society	M/SKashilling, Rugaba & Associates Plot 14 Nakasero Road P.O. Box 22226, Kampala 0717-771177 0712 090060 hrugaba@gmail.com
2.	Hon. Beatrice Byenkya Woman Representative Hoima District	Parliament of Uganda P.O Box 7178 Kampala +256 772 664 694 +256 712 664 694 bbyenkya@parliament.go.ug
3	Bruce Balaba Kabaasa Convocation chairman	Makerere University P.O Box 7062, Kampala, Uganda +256 414 532631/4 0392-548929 brucekabaasa@yahoo.com
4	James Tweheyo	Headmaster Nyakayojo Secondary School P.O Box 462 Tel: +256 48528060, National Vice Chairman Uganda National Teachers Union Plot 28-30 Bombo Road P.O box 377 0772-524-244 +256 41346917 tweheyojk@yahoo.co.uk

5	Dr. Peter Mwesige ACME	Communication Department Makerere University Kampala P.O. Box 7062 +256 772-313067 mwesige@yahoo.com
6	Morrison Rwakakamba Resident Consultant	Uganda National Chamber of Commerce Policy Research & Advocacy Plot 27, Nakasero Road P.O Box 6213, Kampala (U) +256 414340249 0712070181/0777 164660 rwakakamba@yahoo.co.uk
7	Samuel Mpimbaza Hashaka	RDC, Tororo P.O Box 1 Tororo or P.O Box 352 +256 772507182 Hashaka.samuel@yahoo.com
8	Jacqueline Asimwe Mwesige	Private Consultant C/O ACODE +256 772 311713 jamug@yahoo.com
9	Fred Bamwine Deputy Resident District Commissioner Nakawa	RDC Nakawa Division +256 772 423658 fkbamwine@yahoo.com
10	Thomas Tayebwa MUK Convocation	Makerere University Senate Building, Convocation Office 0772 755622/0702200400 tayebwatom@yahoo.co.uk

11	Kamugisha Leonard Coordinator	Mubende Town Council Network of Peace Living With HIV/AIDS Main Street next to the Town Council P.O Box 7 Mubende +256 774259446 (0772671192) kamleonard@yahoo.co.uk
12	Edmond Owor	emowor@yahoo.com 0772502803
13	Hassan Kasingye Political Commissar	Uganda Police Force Hotline +256 77 2 589457 +256 714 667710 +246 782 948464
14	Gerald Karuhanga NYTT	Victoria Advocates Dewinton Road Kampala / Makerere University Convocation Office Room 124 0772357375/0392 966387 Kkg210@yahoo.com
15	Mr. Oramire Stuart Business Development Manager	Jaguar Group P.O Box 4799 Kampala +256 772 860363 stuartoramire@yahoo.com
16	Sunday Bushema Emmanuel Office of the Vice President	State House Nakasero P.O Box 25497, Kampala +256-41-231900 +256 712 973094 Emmasun02@gmail.com/ sandebushema@yahoo.co.uk
17	Francis Nshekanabo	Kiwanuka & Karugire Advocates P.O Box 6061 Acacia Avenue, Kololo 0774-685421

18	Mr. Zikusooka Amos Coordinator, Communications Programme	Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health 0712 425004/0712423004 amosz@hcpuganda.org
19	Richard T. Baguma	Executive Partner RR Relations Plot No. 16, Martyrs Way Ntinda Kampala +256 752383900 +225 752 628998 mafundi@yahoo.com
20	David Pulkol B Director	African Leadership Institute (AFLI) Plot No. 7, Phoenix Engineering Naguru Summit View Rd P.O Box 23277, Kampala (U) +256 41 578739, +256 31 2277124 0777-592477 mzeedpb@yahoo.com dancingwithgiraffes@gmail.com
21	Richard Todwong Presidential Advisor Northern Uganda	State House P.O Box 25497, Kampala Tel: 256-41-231900 +256 772 424271 todwongr@gmail.com
22	Tayebwa Benson President of the Uganda Cooperative Alliance (UCA)	Uganda Cooperative Alliance Ltd Plot 47/49, Nkrumah Road P.O. Box 2215Kampala-Uganda Tel; 256-414-258898/4,8 Fax: 256-414-258556 btayebwa@uca.co.ug
23	Hon. Lydia Wanyoto EAC Legislative Assembly	Parliament of Uganda P.O Box 7178 Kampala 256414377180 +256 772 588 429 lmwanyoto@yahoo.co.uk

24	Keith Muhakanizi Deputy Secretary to the Treasury	Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development P.O Box 8147 Kampala <b>+256 414 707 105/7/3</b> keith.muhakanizi@finance.go.ug
25	Vincent Mujuni Kyamadiidi	Bugamba Sub-county Mbarara District 0782617415 vicentmujuni@yahoo.com
61	Bernard Tabaire	P.O Box 34911 Kampala. bentab@hotmail.com 0772575140

## About State of the Nation Platform

The State of the Nation platform is a national policy forum to promote upward and downward policy conversation on contemporary public policy and governance issues in Uganda. The platform brings together individual leaders and professionals in the public sector, the private sector, civil society, the media and other interest groups into a policy discourse on contemporary policy and governance issues in the country. As an innovation in policy outreach and communication, the platform is a hybrid of ACODE's breakfast dialogue format, interactive panel discussions and outreach through media. This policy outreach initiative has been conceived and is made possible with core funding support to ACODE provided under a grant from the Think Tank Initiative (TTI).

The State of the Nation platform as a policy dialogue fora is defined by five core features:

A core group of persons selected based on their professional backgrounds and achievement, public roles, active leadership in their social groups and interest in public policy and governance issues. Because of the individual influence and positions of its individual members, this core group acts as the brain trust of the State of the Nation platform and provide a policy feedback loop between citizens and policy makers.

Local Level Segment is an innovative elements of the State of the Nation platform as a strategy for downward and upward policy engagement. The district fora aims at localizing national policy debates and putting them into the local context.

Students Segment are organised to nurture and encourage a new generation of young leaders in the country, special segments of the State of the Nation Platform are from time to time organized targeting students and student leaders. Like the District segment of the platform, the students' segment are organized in the different parts of the country and attendance is by invitation.

All proceedings of the various State of the Nation platform are fully recorded. ACODE has entered into partnership with a number of media houses (TV and Radio) to ensure that the proceedings are broadcasted to a wider audience. In addition, the proceedings are also produced in the form of video and audio podcasts and loaded on the internet so that they can be accessed through ACODE and other partner websites.

The participants in the State of the Nation platform have been built into a citizens network linked through electronic media, in particular, e-mail, cell phone and shot message texts. Building on the lessons from previous policy campaigns, the participants are mobilized into a network of citizens exchanging views and ideas on contemporary public policy and governance issues, helping members leverage key policy and decision making centers to increase the impact of their work, and generating consensus on issues of national importance.



Advocates Coalition for  
Development and Environment

Plot 96, Kanjokya Street, Kamwokya.

P.O.Box 29836, Kampala-UGANDA

Telephone: +256-417-712150

Fax: +256-414-534056

Email: [acode@acode-u.org](mailto:acode@acode-u.org) , [library@acode-u.org](mailto:library@acode-u.org)

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