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Uganda Tense After Attack on Obote

By ANTHONY LEWIS

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KAMPALA, Uganda, Jan. 11—Driving into Uganda from Kenya, the visitor is stopped five times at roadblocks over the 120 miles to Kampala. Soldiers with machine guns or rifles ask the purpose of the trip, look over the luggage and wave the car on.

The roadblocks are a visible sign of the tension that persists in Uganda three weeks after the assassination attempt on President Milton Obote. In most respects life now seems calm, but it appears that Uganda narrowly escaped serious internal trouble.

The shooting of Mr. Obote caused more panic than was generally realized abroad. That night, Dec. 19, the sound of guns was heard through the night in Kampala—most of them apparently fired by trigger-happy soldiers.

People coming home from Christmas parties and knowing nothing about the attack on the President were stopped by soldiers, forced to lie on the road, searched and sometimes beaten. Some were shot. The exact number is unknown, but impartial observers estimate that as many as 50 people may have been killed.

Discipline Was Restored

Army discipline and public confidence were restored quickly after the first nervous hours. But that was possible, officials say, only because the assassination attempt had failed and the Government had been able to give assurances about Mr. Obote's condition.

A powerful figure in the Government—Félix K. Onama, Minister of Defense and secretary general of the governing Uganda People's Congress—said in an interview that there might have been "chaos" if the President had been killed. Others think there would have been brutal moves against the Buganda tribe, whose power Mr. Obote has curbed and who would have been suspected of the killing.

Details of the attack, just now being made known, make the President's escape seem remarkable. He was walking to a car from a conference of his party, surrounded by supporters, when someone shot from close range.

Mr. Obote may have been saved because he was sing-

ing—along with the crowd—a popular national song, "Uganda Is Marching Forward." He was clapping his hands and moving his head up and down.

The bullet went through his cheek and passed under his tongue, nicking it and shattering several teeth. The wound was painful, but according to associates not grave or disabling.

He presided at a Cabinet meeting Dec. 30 and is known to have worked long hours this last week. Aides say his speech has not been affected. Replacement of the teeth is the remaining medical problem.

The Government immediately declared a state of emergency and banned the opposition Democratic party. Last night it announced that 26 persons had been placed in preventive detention under the emergency provisions.

Kabaka Died

There were reports of one or two men being arrested as the suspected assassins, but all indications are that the authors of the attack and its motives have not been discovered. This uncertainty is one reason for continuing tension.

Observers say there are three main possible sources for the attack, if it was politically motivated and not an isolated individual crime.

One would be ethnic opponents, notably the Buganda. In 1966 Mr. Obote deposed their hereditary ruler, the Kabaka,

and abolished the special place given the kingdom of Buganda within Uganda by the British before independence.

The Kabaka, Sir Frederick Mutesa, died in London last November. A coroner's verdict said the cause of death was alcohol, but some Bugandans suspect foul play.

A second possible source of enemies would be ideological opponents uneasy about Mr. Obote's recent moves toward the left. Under his Common Man's Charter, he was adopted such mildly socialistic programs as more public investment and producer cooperatives for coffee growers.

Finally, some think there are men in the President's own party and Government who see themselves as rivals for power. Certainly Mr. Obote has thought so in the past. Five ministers were arrested at a Cabinet meeting in 1966 and have been held in detention since.

The feeling that Uganda might have slipped into turmoil without Mr. Obote reflects the widespread belief that he stands far above all other politicians as a national figure, able to overcome tribal differences. Even those who criticize the toughness of his tactics hold that view.

One critic said privately that President Obote had held a small country together, against great tribal strains, by opting for a politics of reconciliation rather than one of innovation.

Americans Are Optimistic

The President is personally farther to the left than his Government's policy, this critic said, but he understands that Uganda is a conservative country and is bringing on economic reform gradually.

American observers are generally optimistic about Uganda's economic prospects, especially in agriculture. The soil and climate are good, and there is some tradition of intensive cash farming.

The Americans, and others, think that the major immediate problem is the fragility of the political structure. Uganda is a country where ethnic sensitivities are so strong that many would rather see a foreigner as, say, a university dean than pick one Ugandan over another.

The fragility was demonstrated in the jitters right after Dec. 19, but Americans Embassy officials and others say that Uganda has demonstrated relative strength by getting back to near-normal so quickly.



Camera Press-Pix

President Milton Obote