

# Garang death breeds African conspiracy theories

## Special to Sentinel-Voice

The death of Sudanese Vice-President John Garang in a Ugandan helicopter crash has spawned a host of bizarre conspiracy theories in east Africa — ranging from sabotage to Rwandan hijackers sneaking on board.

Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, whose helicopter Garang had been using, is particularly incensed by reports in Kampala that have gone into overdrive following the July 30 shock death of his friend and talismanic former southern rebel chief.

Garang waged a 21-year war against Sudan's northern Islamist government. But just months after signing a peace deal, his body was found in the wreckage of the aircraft after it plummeted into the remote mountains on the border with northeast Uganda.

The chopper crashed during a storm, and Garang's supporters have said they do not suspect foul play.

Leading the charge with a frenzy of claims surrounding his death is Uganda's *Red Pepper* newspaper, a popular tabloid that mixes political rumors with lots of female

flesh.

First it claimed, without giving any evidence, that the chopper was sabotaged in a failed bid to kill Museveni.

Then on Monday it suggested spies from neighboring Rwanda had sneaked on board and shot Garang twice in the head before the crash — drawing an angry response from the government.

"The *Red Pepper's* extra heads, persons, bullet wounds, etc. are simply a figment of their speculative reporting and should be ignored," Ugandan Defense Minister Amama Mbabazi said this week as the bodies of the Ugandan crew were flown home.

"No people unknown to the pilots, engineer or security officers sneaked stealthily or otherwise onto the chopper."

Uganda has insisted only 14 were on board the helicopter, but on Wednesday the United Nations said 17 bodies had been recovered from the crash site.

Mbabazi said false and insensitive reporting could damage regional peace and security efforts. But it is not only the salacious *Red Pep-*

*per* that has attracted government criticism.

Uganda's independent *Daily Monitor* implied that Museveni had lent his friend a defective helicopter. It quoted sources as saying Museveni had opted not to use his helicopter for a trip to Rwanda in June because it had technical problems.

### CRIMINAL RUMORS

Museveni's office pointed out that the chopper had been undergoing a \$1.4 million refurbishment in Belarus at the time.

"It is criminal for anyone to say that," raged senior presidential adviser John Nagenda about the report.

Last week Museveni ordered his information minister to correct another *Monitor* story that said Sudan was holding the bodies of the Ugandan crew until its investigation was over.

At prayers for the dead Ugandans on Wednesday, Museveni vowed to close newspapers he said were "vultures" meddling in security issues with their speculations about Garang.

He highlighted the *Red Pepper*.

"I thought those were confused young boys busy with naked girls," he told the crowds. "If they have gone from there to regional security, they must stop, or we will stop them."

Media reports in Sudan, where news of Garang's death triggered riots that killed at least 130 people, have been more restrained — not least because two newspapers were suspended for a day over their coverage of the street violence.

One of the most inflammatory — that government-

## Taylor

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Conte in January 2005, that he had been backing armed groups in Liberia and making telephone calls to senior government officials there as the country prepares for crunch October elections designed to return it to democracy. The three leaders raised the possibility of Nigeria referring the matter to the regional Economic Community of West African States if needed.

The question of Taylor's asylum has cropped up with increasing frequency for Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo.

U.S. President George W. Bush referred to it at the White House earlier this year, international rights groups like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have launched campaigns to bring Taylor to jus-

aligned militia leader Paulino Matiep had also been killed — fueled the north-south bloodshed. He later appeared on TV.

"This and additional false claims that other southern leaders had died sparked widespread panic," the International Crisis Group think-tank said in a report.

Eager to allay fears about the mechanical condition of his helicopter, Museveni drove almost 1,000 km (620 miles) to Yei in southern Sudan on Friday to pay last respects by Garang's coffin

and assure mourners the chopper had been in good shape.

But he was criticized by the Sudanese government for suggesting "an external factor" may have caused the crash.

A spokesman said they were "pretty sure" it was an accident due to bad weather, and hoped all parties, especially Uganda, would stop issuing statements that were not based on facts.

Additional reporting by Ophera McDoom in Khartoum.

tice, and UN human rights chief Louise Arbour last month called for him to stand trial.

Obasanjo has always said he would hand Taylor over, should a future elected government in Liberia ever decide to press charges and demand his extradition. Liberians go to the polls on October 11 to vote in new leaders, but whoever wins will not take power until January.

Nigerian officials were not immediately available for comment on the joint statement.

Taylor, after training as a guerrilla fighter in Libya, launched a bush war in Liberia on Christmas Day 1989. His faction gained the upper hand and he was finally elected president in 1997 but it was to be another six years before the war finally ended.

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