

Conflict Analysis for the Northern Uganda Peace Initiative (NUPI):

Launching a Dialogue for Peace between the LRA and the GOU

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This report is the result of a visit to Uganda (Kampala) March 3 – 16 on behalf of PADCO for the U.S. government-funded Northern Uganda Peace Initiative (NUPI) and is based on meetings with representatives of the Government of Uganda, Ugandan civil society, traditional Acholi leaders, and members of the international donor community (a list of meetings is attached). The terms of reference for this trip were the following:

- a) identify ways to assist the President's Peace Team (PPT), or other designated negotiating person/team, in providing humanitarian relief to the people of Northern Uganda;
- b) guide the PADCO team in devising a strategy for engaging the LRA effectively in a first meeting focused on modalities of humanitarian assistance;
- c) provide review of past peace initiatives for PADCO team to assist the PPT in understanding and incorporating lessons from past peace efforts;
- d) assist PADCO team in developing terms of reference for the PPT (or other designated body);
- e) assist PADCO's Chief of Party and the Deputy Chief of Party with the development of a training program for the PPT; and,
- f) lead the PADCO team in helping the GOU and PPT understand the LRA and Joseph Kony to enable more effective conflict resolution training.

Because of the overlap in a number of the terms of reference above, I address these below in groupings that may cover one or more of these terms.

1. Humanitarian access as entry point

Given the barbarity of conflicts in Bosnia and Rwanda and the impotent international response, it has become more common in the past decade to search for ways to intervene in armed conflicts even when the conflict may not appear to be "ripe for resolution"¹ because of the suffering, death, and displacement caused by the conflict. This technique has had some successes, such as the education agreement between Kosovar Albanians and Serbs in the mid-late 1990s² and the "Guinea Worm ceasefire" in Sudan³. This approach relies on finding a shared concern among all parties. The presupposition that humanitarian assistance is a shared concern of the GOU and LRA that could provide a wedge to open peace talks as was the case in Sudan may not be applicable.

¹ I. William Zartman describes "ripeness" as including a hurting stalemate between the parties that includes recognition that a clear military victory is not feasible.

² Mediated by the Communita Sant'Egidio of Rome

³ Mediated by Global 2000 of The Carter Center 1995

The case of the Lords Resistance Army/Movement (LRA/M⁴) and the Government of Uganda (GOU) differs on nearly all counts. The GOU (President Yoweri Museveni specifically) has enjoyed a sterling reputation and relationship with the west, especially with donor countries such as the U.S., UK, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Norway for its successes in economic recovery, democratization (despite the “no-party” system), education, attention to health care (HIV/AIDS), and women’s rights. Uganda has been the beneficiary of international financial support and inclusion in the community of nations. Until very recently, the international donor community has ignored the conflict in the north in giving assistance to the GOU. Because of the 18-year war in the north, that part of the country remains underdeveloped; financial assistance is thus concentrated in a smaller area where it can have a greater impact⁵. For historical reasons (explained elsewhere – e.g., background documentation for NUPI grant) and President Museveni’s reference to Uganda as a nation of Bantus,⁶ it is not clear that he sees the north as an important or integral part of Uganda. The opposition LRA is a marginal, highly isolated group that controls no territory, has no clear political agenda, and has made few attempts to communicate its aims to the public. With inadequate resources to meet its basic human needs (despite on and off support from the GOS), the LRA raids villages and loots food and supplies. It has negligible popular support among the people of the regions in which it operates (mainly Acholiland and, more recently, parts of eastern Uganda). Joseph Kony and the LRA leadership display no concern for public opinion and, in fact, their trademark abductions, senseless and cruel killings of innocent children and adults, display to what extent they operate without ethics or concern about the welfare of their own people. The LRA is highly sensitive to negative publicity; focusing on humanitarian access may create a win-lose situation where the GOU gains much in positive p.r. and the LRA loses because it does not control any territory and does not have the capacity to ensure safe access anywhere even if it desired to do so.

The Sudanese case involves two main actors, the Government of Sudan (GOS) and the Sudanese Peoples Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M) who each have clear political agendas and who each hold territory. The fighting in the south complicates GOS attempts to capitalize on oil revenues and thus limits the economic possibilities of the nation. Further, the GOS has been sanctioned by the U.S. government, labeled a state supporter of terrorism, and been attacked by U.S. missiles. The GOS has sought any and every opportunity to be accepted back into the fold of the international community. Humanitarian access was one means by which the GOS could demonstrate its good faith to the international community. The opposition SPLA/M has a huge constituency not only in Sudan but globally and controls a wide swath of southern Sudan. It has received support from neighboring democratic countries (Kenya, Uganda) and is widely considered a legitimate movement for the greater rights and freedoms of the southern Sudanese peoples. It would not benefit the SPLA/M to be perceived as obstructing access for humanitarian relief and could, in fact, lead to a curtailment of international support if it were seen to be uninterested in the welfare of innocent civilians. Each party’s control over territory meant that they had the capacity to provide access for humanitarian relief.

⁴ Although Joseph Kony refers to the group as the Lords Resistance Army/Movement, in this paper I will use the more frequently used LRA only.

⁵ One-third of the country is not productive because of the conflict; 50% of the GOU budget comes from foreign assistance.

⁶ Meeting with President Museveni, (date).

Therefore, appealing to the noble goal of humanitarian access to the people of the north may not meet the desired aim of creating an opening for peace talks on either side. But the goal of finding an entry point to peace talks remains valid. Because of the plethora of peace efforts over the past many years, both sides are suspicious and distrustful of the other. As a first stage, it may be that NUPI needs to focus on confidence-building measures and see what actions each party is willing to take to seal their commitment to a peace process.

2. Understanding the LRA and Joseph Kony

Joseph Kony has created his own culture, the culture of the LRA, that draws from traditional Acholi beliefs and Christianity and that emerged through the victimization of the Acholi people by Museveni's NRM. The LRA has its roots in the Holy Spirit Movement of Alice Lakwena⁷ who came as close to Kampala as Jinja in her battle to unseat Museveni in the late 80s before taking refuge in Kenya.

Kony is not an educated man and has had very little exposure to the world. His parents were humble farmers who had more than a dozen children, of which perhaps only 2 are still living (Kony and a sister). His father, whom Kony respected and said he would listen to, died last year. His mother is living outside of Kampala and is quite elderly. Kony has had only 2-3 telephone conversations with his parents in the past 16+ years but has repeatedly requested assistance in meeting them face-to-face.

Kony is neither dumb nor crazy and appears aware of his own limitations⁸. It is not clear to what extent Kony himself believes he has supernatural powers, but he is capable of using this spiritual approach mixed with Acholi practice to indoctrinate those he abducts and those who joined him. His use of violence, including rape and forcing children to kill, often members of their family or other children, has had the effect of ensuring loyalty and obedience.

Kony perceives Acholis outside the LRA as corrupted by the government and impure in their knowledge and practice of Acholi traditions. "... I know that you are all stupid. Why I am called a teacher is because I Kony know for sure that there is now nobody who can teach the Acholi back home like us or I... Museveni has found it very easy to manipulate you against me."⁹

The LRA's *raison d'être* is to disrupt, wreak mayhem, and bring shame, dishonor, and illegitimacy to Museveni's administration. The LRA has been exceedingly effective in its nuisance value and has tenaciously hung on despite numerous attempts to eradicate it. While many in the Acholi community may be sympathetic to the anti-Museveni message and may have supported the LRA initially¹⁰, the LRA's extreme cruelty and violence against its own people has lost virtually all support among the Acholi in northern Uganda¹¹. Museveni has portrayed this as a conflict in the north, but Kony sees this as a national struggle against the

⁷ There is an excellent book on Alice and the Holy Spirit Movement published in Europe in the late 90s, I believe.

⁸ Meeting with Joseph Kony, 2/24/00.

⁹ English version of taped Kony message to the Acholi people, March 2000.

¹⁰ Several people commented that the Acholi elders originally blessed Joseph Kony and sent him off to war but they have since made clear that they do not support this war.

¹¹ I do not know if the diaspora has supported the LRA in its battle against the NRM, but it is possible that some support (whether financial or moral) comes from outside that makes Kony think he has more support than he does. Ex-patriot communities tend to take purer and more extreme ideological positions than people on the ground do. As ex-patriots, they do not suffer the consequences and may feel an obligation to support the "cause" in their absence from the conflict.

NRM and Museveni¹² and therefore agreed in 2000, under some duress from the GOS, to meet with me, a non-Ugandan to discuss talks with the GOU. He has been consistent in calling this a national struggle for democracy and the overthrow of the Museveni regime.

The LRA remains a mobile force, with its main base in Sudan and much movement back and forth. With the government of Sudan (GOS), Equatorial Defense Force (EDF), and SPLA/M now fighting against the LRA, it is unclear whether they remain at their base in southern Sudan or have moved elsewhere in southern Sudan or have more people in northern Uganda. The ongoing Sudan peace talks at Lake Naivasha will have a significant impact on the LRA: if the talks result in a comprehensive peace agreement, the GOS may once and for all expel the LRA, which could have severely negative repercussions on the north if the LRA come back armed and angry and if adequate preparations for their peaceful reception are not in place. If the talks fail, the GOS could recommence arming the LRA, prolonging their life and suffering on both sides of the border.

The GOU has claimed for years that the LRA is a creation of the GOS but this is incorrect as the LRA pre-dates the Bashir regime and was active long before refuge was given in Sudan in the early-mid 90s. The GOU also claims that the GOS controls the LRA and that they can get to Kony whenever they want. The LRA operates in and out of southern Sudanese territory, including that controlled by the SPLA/M, not the GOS. From conversations with a number of people, it seems that the GOS has ceased almost all support for the LRA but individual commanders in the Sudanese army continue to supply Kony and his troops. It may still be possible to go through the GOS to request contact with Kony, but this will probably be an unpredictable channel both because the GOS would not want to acknowledge any degree of control over the LRA and because it may not have it. The fact that the GOU claims that the LRA is a Sudanese invention and that the GOS supplies the LRA (or they would have died out) is a form of denial of the depth of the problem in Uganda between the north and south. The LRA has its roots in the serious discontent of the Acholi people with the NRM and unless the LRA is dealt with as a part of the whole conflict, the north-south divide will continue, even if the LRA is vanquished.

Day by day, the GOU is planting the seeds for more conflict in the north with the IDP camps which are overcrowded, lack adequate sanitation, and are unable to meet basic human needs of food, shelter, and security. The LRA attack the camps and the people in the camps want to return to their own homes where they feel safer. They should be allowed to do so as they can also then provide for themselves through growing their own food. The GOU, through these camps, is systematically destroying the ability of the Acholi to provide for themselves and therefore tearing apart the fabric of Acholi society. As a non-Acholi told me in reference to the IDP camps in the north, "The Acholi will never forgive a government that does this to them."

The people of the north are thus mistreated by both the GOU and the LRA. The LRA is a force consisting of approximately 90% abductees/hostages. Some of these have been abducted more than once, some have been recently abducted, and some have been in the LRA for more than a decade and do not know any other life. Many of the LRA who have not had access to education and have committed atrocities are unsure what they would do if they returned or how they would be accepted into Acholi society.

¹² Notes from meeting with Kony, 2/24/00 and English version of taped Kony message, March 2000.

2.a. The LRA as terrorist group and the ICC investigation: A hostile climate

The role of the U.S. in this project will be suspect to Kony from the outset. He has long viewed the U.S. as a Museveni ally and complicit in the war against him since he knows the U.S. provides the GOU with military support. Museveni's successful bid to the International Criminal Court (ICC) to investigate the LRA for war crimes has also clouded the horizon. Undoubtedly, Kony will be angry at the injustice perpetrated by the international community in accepting to investigate the LRA and not the NRM. Coupled with U.S. support for the SPLA/M, the GOS cessation or slow-down of support for the LRA, increasing numbers of battles now not only against the SPLA/M in Sudan and the UPDF in Uganda but also the EDF and the GOS, Kony is unlikely to be kindly disposed to the U.S. whom he will view as the enemy. None of this, however, should be interpreted to mean that Kony will be unwilling to have the U.S. involved as a possible facilitator.

Kony may be interested in meeting with a U.S. team (either personally or through representatives) because he would like to gain attention and because he may hope to influence the U.S. to change its support of Museveni. With the possible LRA hostility towards the U.S., Americans working in northern Uganda may need to take extra security precautions and anyone going to meet with the LRA from the NUPI team should be well informed of the increased risk. As much information as possible should be collected on Kony's disposition towards NUPI and the U.S. before attempting any meeting to ensure, as best as possible, the security of whoever goes to meet with the LRA.

2.b. Defeating the LRA militarily: Possible scenarios

If the GOU believes it can defeat the LRA militarily, it is most probably mistaken. Museveni is a brilliant man who has conquered impressive foes. But he may not understand that fighting a group such as the LRA that has no base that can be attacked, has no respect for human life, and that consists of child soldiers who are traumatized, scared, and forced to be human fodder requires that the opposing army be willing to die in comparable numbers. And he may not have most of the country supporting Operation Iron Fist, launched in 2002. Prior to the commencement of the military campaign, a Parliamentary Committee reported that after five months of traveling around the country asking Ugandans if they favored a peaceful or military solution to the conflict in the north, the Parliamentary group received a 98% response favoring a peaceful resolution¹³.

The UPDF is divided, demoralized, and dying at an unacceptable rate for a war that must appear to most soldiers to have no end and no noble goal. The UPDF are said to re-recruit escaped LRA children and adults against their will and to use them as scouts to find where LRA are encamped. Approximately 95% of the UPDF is HIV positive¹⁴ and to follow a medical course of action, they cannot be in the field fighting if they are to eat properly and take pills at regular intervals. In addition, the UPDF soldiers in the field are aware that they are killing children; professional soldiers are trained to kill the enemy – when the enemy is a child, it extracts an untenable psychological cost. They are demoralized by seeing commanding officers and internal security people profiting from the war. The phenomenon of “ghost soldiers” has been more and more publicized lately but it is unclear what steps the GOU is taking to investigate and hold commanders responsible for corruption and war profiteering. The army may pose a threat to Museveni if this corruption and death at the hands of the LRA continue. One can imagine a scenario in which a group of disgruntled

¹³ Report from Parliamentary Committee, 2003. Report referred to by someone I met with.

¹⁴ Information from one of the people interviewed; figure was not verified.

UPDF form an opposition military group and recruit militias in the north to join them against Museveni. According to many people we met with, Museveni is not being told the true cost of the war in the north because UPDF commanders and other government officials are afraid to tell him the truth.

Were Operation Iron Fist or its successor operation to succeed in killing Kony and the top commanders, it is possible that an off-shoot of the LRA would emerge, much as the LRA came out of the conquest of the Holy Spirit Movement, a much less brutal movement than the LRA. At some point, we will know if the LRA equals Kony; but it would be unwise to base actions on this assumption. The grievances that underlie the LRA – lack of opportunities for Acholis in the Museveni government, lack of development for the north, and lack of integration of Acholis in the national identity of Uganda – are all issues that remain salient and deeply felt. Crushing the LRA without dealing with the root causes of the conflict will not silence for long a people who have experienced such trauma and victimization by their own (the LRA) and the “other” (Museveni). The north must become a viable part of Uganda and the Acholis must be thought of and treated as Ugandans. The outcome of this war may provide the basis for renewed struggle unless the causes are addressed and a plan for regional development is implemented.

One could say that Museveni has been fortunate in having this conflict isolated in the north for so long. He has been able to dismiss it as a northern problem for over a decade – the fact that it is also led by the enigmatic, uncommunicative Kony also allows Museveni to dismiss the war as one led by a crazy, possessed, psychotic man. As long as the casualties were largely Acholi, Ugandans in other parts of the country were unaffected. With Operation Iron Fist and the subsequent spread of the LRA terror into non-Acholi areas, Museveni has to deal with it and cannot do so through force alone. Periphery conflicts such as the war with the LRA are easier to ignore than those that threaten the center, but now that the LRA is moving, the center is threatened both politically and physically.

Not only is the LRA a threat, but with the arming of militias in different parts of the country to fight the LRA, inadequate resources to give to rebels coming in to take amnesty, the GOU is may be cooking a potentially lethal stew of disaffected people around the country. There are apparently 6,000 ADF wandering around Kampala, having accepted amnesty only to be told that there were inadequate resources available to give them the allowance they were supposed to receive. Together with the threat of the LRA, these short-sighted strategies pose a serious risk to the GOU. Perhaps a lesson of the former Soviet Union is that it did not collapse from the core but from the periphery.

3. Next steps

The GOU – LRA conflict is a symptom of a larger conflict between north and south and to resolve this conflict requires a national effort and national peacebuilding. This larger conflict will not be resolved through defeat of the LRA and may not be resolved even through a peace agreement with the LRA. The conflict may be settled, but until the root causes are dealt with, this country will not be unified and able to move forward with secure economic and political development and democratization. As an important part of the resolution and reconciliation process, the GOU and LRA should acknowledge and apologize for their mistreatment of the Acholi.

Further, for a sustainable peace to take root, long-term psychological counseling (dealing with trauma, rape, etc.) must be available for anyone victimized in the north, whether by the

LRA, UPDF, or other. Development assistance must flow to the north, and returned LRA must receive training so that they can become productive citizens. Primary and high school courses need to be available to returned LRA who might now be in their 20s and older; not all returnees want to become tailors or carpenters – vocational training is not appropriate for all and will not use to best effect those who want to become professionals.

Many in the media in Uganda are irresponsible and inflame rather than report facts. Media training will be helpful in professionalizing journalists and radio and TV broadcasters. Similarly, the national army and security forces need training in conflict resolution and human rights so that they behave in a professional and ethical manner.