



UGANDA PROGRAMME

Facing the challenge of social healing

The situation in war-torn northern Uganda changed dramatically in 2005. New Year began with the end of a six-week ceasefire between the country's armed forces and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Other options for a negotiated settlement dissolved when a high-profile mediation effort by Betty Bigombe came to a standstill, and arrest warrants were issued by the International Criminal Court against the rebels' top five commanders.

Officially, the Ugandan government claimed the war was in its final phase and the LRA on the brink of collapse. Yet vast parts of Acholiland remained no-go areas for its people. More than one million still live in appalling conditions in makeshift camps, with up to 1000 war-related deaths per week across the region. Abductions of civilians by the LRA continue.

Against this increasingly challenging setting for peacebuilding work, CR and our partners made progress toward our goal of building an environment that can help end the war, deal with its effects, and reach a lasting settlement and just peace.

Understanding the conflict

Despite 20 years of war in northern Uganda and much work to end the violence and help community reconciliation, little information exists on why some LRA commanders leave the rebels and return to civilian life while others remain in the bush.

In 2005 CR and Quaker Peace & Social Witness (QPSW) closed this gap by doing a series of interviews with former LRA soldiers. This research gave new insights into their decision-making patterns and how civil society can influence these. It identified the crucial role of direct communication between the rebels, civil society representatives and local communities.

It also revealed the big incentive for LRA members of reintegration processes that offer them better futures. It showed how community peacebuilding that enables them to come home is proving more effective than high-profile initiatives trying to end the conflict. The real heroes are those unsung individuals who despite their great suffering are able to welcome back into their midst perpetrators of terrible acts, who are also abducted children.

A joint workshop in Uganda of researchers and local peace organizations shared these findings, which have also been built into our partners' programmes.

Photo: A group of Lord's Resistance Army returnees. CR is working with the religious and traditional leaders to support the return process across northern Uganda and southern Sudan.

Our research revealed how community peacebuilding that enables LRA soldiers to come home is proving more effective than high-profile initiatives trying to end the conflict.



Building relationships for peace

Two of our partners, the Justice and Peace Commission of Gulu Archdiocese (JPC) and the traditional leaders of Acholi (Ker Kwaro Acholi), strengthened their relationship-building work into neighbouring districts and across the border into southern Sudan to help deal with the regional aspect of violent conflicts in northern Uganda.

JPC set up a permanent presence in eastern Acholiland's more remote areas and led mediation efforts in conflicts between rural communities and migrating pastoralists. By bringing people together to work on ways to reduce violent incidents during the annual migration season, our partners greatly improved security in the region. This work also strengthened inter-community relations to tackle the causes of these conflicts.

Photo: A survivor of a massacre in 1995 at Atiak camp shares his story publicly for the first time at a 10-year commemoration ceremony supported by CR.

KKA carried out a series of visits and joint workshops with traditional authorities and clan elders from southern Sudan. This improved understanding between war-affected communities on both sides of the border and began joint peacebuilding activities. It also opened up chances for further communication with the LRA and will ease the return of ex-combatants to their communities.

Looking ahead

In 2006 we will increase our programme capacity and consolidate partnerships in Uganda and the UK. We will expand our activities in southern Sudan to strengthen a regional approach for ending the conflict and addressing its root causes. Further research into the LRA and the conflict dynamics will also help answer questions arising from our daily work and inform our lobby work with policymakers.

For more information about our work see our website: www.c-r.org



“It will take as long for us to get out of this conflict as it has taken for us to get into it.”

Lam Oryem Cosmas

“It will take as long for us to get out of this conflict as it has taken for us to get into it,” says Lam Cosmas, one of northern Uganda’s most active community peacebuilders.

Lam has long stressed the need for setting realistic expectations about any resolution process. “Peace is a long-term group effort,” was an oft-repeated mantra at the Acholi Religious Leaders’ Peace Initiatives (ARLPI), where he worked from 1997 until 2002.

Lam has always sought to make peacebuilding accountable to those people suffering because of the war and involve them in attempts for its resolution. Under his direction ARLPI grew rapidly and formed strong links in the internally displaced people’s camps through a network of peace committees. These groups disseminated peace messages and helped defuse local conflicts.

Lam recently returned from studies in the USA to work on these themes with our support. At his home place of Atiak, he organized a hearing in 2005 for survivors of a massacre by the LRA to talk publicly about their experiences for the first time in over a decade.

This groundbreaking event put the victims of atrocities – so often marginalized even by peacebuilding efforts – centre stage. “People really listened – it is not usual for Acholis to cry in public, but the crowd, they were really crying – they were moved.” It showed the need for local peacebuilders to work with such groups to achieve genuine local reconciliation.

Lam recently set up a liaison office in Kampala for our partner Justice and Peace Commission Gulu, taking these important messages to the national level. He leads reconciliation efforts between communities across northern and central Uganda, enabling different ethnic groups that have viewed each other with suspicion or fear for decades, to talk, acknowledge past atrocities, build mutual respect and coexist peacefully.

“People are really coming together and learning,” he explains. “The youth who have grown up hearing stories about other communities are listening to their counterparts and questioning their parents about the past. We hope they can really lead this process if we work with them.”

Photo: Lam Cosmas (right) talks with a Karimajong herdsman during work to build bridges between Acholi communities and pastoralists and reduce violence in the annual migration season.