

ACCORD: ENGAGING ARMED GROUPS IN PEACE PROCESSES

Northern Uganda Primer

This document is intended as a simple overview produced for the Accord Programme workshop on 'Engaging armed groups in peace processes', London, July 2004. As such, it does not seek to represent the full complexity or the contested nature of the situation described.

Basics

Borders: Sudan, DRC, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania.

Population: circa 26.4 million



Ethnic groups: Baganda 17%, Ankole 8%, Basoga 8%, Iteso 8%, Bakiga 7%, Langi 6%, Rwanda 6%, Bagisu 5%, Acholi 4%, Lugbara 4%, Batoro 3%, Bunyoro 3%, Alur 2%, Bagwere 2%, Bakonjo 2%, Jopodhola 2%, Karamojong 2%, Rundi 2%, non-African (European, Asian, Arab) 1%, other 8%

Religions: Roman Catholic 33%, Protestant 33%, Muslim 16%, indigenous beliefs 18%

Government: Republic. The President is head of government and head of state. Political party activity is strictly limited.

Economy: GDP per capita \$1,400 (ppp 2003). Main exports: coffee, fish and fish products, tea; gold, cotton, flowers, horticultural products

Historical Background

Indigenous kingdoms emerged from the 14th century. Among them were the Bunyoro, Toro, Ankole, Busoga and the Buganda, who became the dominant group. Uganda came under British sphere of influence in the colonial period, and the British colonial authority's relationship with the different ethnic groups varied. For example, from 1945 to independence in 1962, the army was recruited mainly from the north.

The post-independence multi-party democracy collapsed within a few years; the regime of Idi Amin (1971-79) was responsible for the deaths of some 300,000 opponents, and guerrilla war and human rights abuses under Milton Obote (1980-85) claimed at least another 100,000 lives.

In July 1985 the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA) overthrew Obote's government and Tito Okello was sworn in as Head of State. In order to consolidate the state, they invited Yoweri Museveni's **National Resistance Movement/Army (NRM/A)** and other opposition groups to join a government of national unity. But at the end of the year the NRM withdrew and intensified its military campaign against the Okello government. In January 1986 the NRM/A took Kampala and Museveni was sworn in as President. Soon afterwards the NRA had established control over most parts of the country.

Museveni has ruled Uganda ever since. His government promulgated non-party presidential and legislative elections based a 'Movement system' that prohibits parties from fielding candidates in elections. Relative stability has been brought to most of the country, but not the north.

Northern Uganda

While the NRA and its allies fought to establish a hold on the northern parts of Uganda in 1986, the local population suffered numerous atrocities. As a result Alice Auma 'Lakwena' formed the **Holy Spirit Mobile Force (HSMF)** to oppose the government. Since Acholi mistrust of the NRM/A was widespread, the resistance fighters enjoyed considerable support and attracted many young men into their ranks. Part army, part cult, the HSMF won a number of major battles and was able to advance as far as south as Jinja before being defeated. In addition to this turmoil, Karamojong cattle raiders swept through the sub-region in August 1987 looting most of the region's livestock, effectively destroying the economic base of Acholi society. Many Acholi perceived NRA complicity in the raids, thus adding to the built-up of mistrust.

After the defeat of the HSMF, attempts to form a resistance movement culminated in the creation of the **Lords Resistance Army (LRA)** in 1988, led by Joseph Kony, reportedly a relative of Lakwena. Fighting between the LRA and the NRA (which later became the Uganda People's Defence Force - UPDF) has continued ever since, resulting in large numbers of civilian casualties in the north.

The most concerted effort for a negotiated settlement took place in 1993-94, when the then Minister for the North, Betty Bigombe, initiated contacts with the LRM/A. From November 1993, a government delegation met LRM/A representatives in a series of talks, but hopes were shattered in early February 1994 when Museveni delivered an ultimatum to the LRA, giving them seven days to surrender or face military onslaught. The LRM/A retreated into southern Sudan, from where they have been able to continue the war.

Around this time the nature of the war altered. The Sudanese government started providing military and logistic support to the LRA and allowed them to launch attacks from bases on their territory. The LRA intensified its use of landmines and turned to mass abduction of children and young adults in order to recruit its fighting force. Since then massacres of civilians, abduction of children as fighters and sex slaves, and other atrocities have characterized LRA tactics, while its claims to have any popular political agenda for people in the north have waned.

The Ugandan government's responses to this situation consistently failed to protect the population from attack, and focused on pursuing a military campaign against those who have

become LRA fighters – the children it failed to protect. UPDF offensives have been followed by brutal LRA retaliation against civilians. LRA killings have extended to those seeking to make contacts with them, with the murder of government approved peace mission delegates in 1996.

In 1996 the government began to relocate civilians into ‘protected villages’ to shield them from LRA attacks. Food, sanitation, health and education facilities were inadequate, and in some cases the UPDF used violence to force the unwilling into the camps, and many have remained there since.

In 1997, Acholi living abroad organized a civil society meeting in London, ‘Kacoke Madit’ (Big Meeting), in order to highlight the human rights and humanitarian situation of the conflict in northern Uganda. It also brought LRM/A and government representatives face-to-face. In the same year the Community of Sant’ Egidio became involved in trying to negotiate a settlement, and representatives of the LRA met a Ugandan delegation in Rome in December. The government made the next round of talks conditional on participation by an LRA field commander but disputes within the LRA over its political representation led to the collapse of the initiative. Museveni later rejected further negotiations with the LRA.

In 1998 Muslim, Catholic and Anglican Church leaders in Acholi formed the Acholi Religious Leaders’ Peace Initiative (ARLPI) in order to combine efforts to end the violence in Acholi. The second Kacoke Madit (KM) took place in London in July, but the LRA did not attend.

During a relatively peaceful 1999, the Ugandan Parliament passed an amnesty bill raising hopes of a return to peace. The Carter Center helped to normalize relations between the governments of Uganda and Sudan, who signed the *Nairobi Peace Accord* on the 8 December. However, the LRA and the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA – a Sudanese insurgent group which for a long time received considerable support from the Ugandan government) were excluded from the talks and did not respect the agreements. Insecurity persisted in Acholi and approximately 400,000 people remained in the ‘protected villages’ where they came under repeated attack from the LRA.

In February 2000 the Carter Center intensified its efforts to normalize relations between Uganda and Sudan. Contacts were made with the LRA’s high command in order to involve them in the process. Later that year it was announced that Sudan had agreed to move the LRA 1,000 miles north of the Ugandan border. In November the third Kacoke Madit (KM2000) in Kenya was cut short due to concerns over an Ebola outbreak.

In March 2001 Museveni won a second Presidential term, winning only a small portion of the vote in northern Uganda. Soon after the election and the official end of the Ebola epidemic, the LRA resumed attacks against civilian targets. In the first year of the Amnesty Act, few LRA fighters had left the LRA. Behind the scenes new efforts were undertaken to open communication with the LRA. Twice UPDF mobile units attacked religious leaders and Acholi elders who were meeting with LRA commanders to discuss the modalities for reporting under the amnesty. A ‘demilitarized zone’ was declared by the government to facilitate LRA movement as a confidence-building measure. In August the LRA indicated that the effective ceasefire in

place since the beginning of June was coming to an end. The war continued and more people moved to the camps.

Following an agreement between the two governments, thousands of UPDF troops moved into Sudan in March 2002 in 'Operation Iron Fist'. This incursion forced the LRA to leave its bases and relocate to the Imatong Mountains. Soon after the LRA re-entered northern Uganda in numbers and stepped up its attacks on civilian and military targets in the region. To date the security situation continued to deteriorate.

In 2003, a unilateral ceasefire by the LRA produced a limited government ceasefire, but it was violated on a large scale. A presidential peace team was nominated, but attempts to start negotiations were unsuccessful. The number of IDPs in Acholi rose to over one million – about 95 percent of the population – and the insurgency spread to other districts in Uganda's east and north west, forcing more people to leave their homes. In many areas local militias were created in an attempt to protect civilians from LRA atrocities.

In 2004, the UPDF offensive against the LRA has continued and allegedly weakened the LRA significantly. Some of the top commanders have been captured or killed. But there have been more civilian casualties, and more children being abducted and subsequently killed. Several initiatives (notably one by the Community of Sant' Egidio) have again tried to open dialogue between the government and the LRA in order to start negotiations. In January, Museveni asked the International Criminal Court to investigate LRA abuses, receiving a willing response from the ICC prosecutor. In February the LRA massacred around 200 civilians living in a camp in one of the worst atrocities yet seen. The Sudanese ambassador to Uganda, Sirajal-Din Hamid, announced that Khartoum is prepared to help investigate Kony and have him arrested.

Further reading

International Crisis Group. *Northern Uganda: understanding and solving the conflict* (Nairobi/Brussels: ICG Africa Report no. 77, 14 April 2004)

Okello Lucima. *Protracted conflict, elusive peace: initiatives to end the violence in northern Uganda* (London: Conciliation Resources, *Accord: an international review of peace initiatives* issue 11, 2002)