

# ***Coming Home***

**Understanding why commanders of the Lord's  
Resistance Army choose to return to a civilian life**

**May 2006**

**A research collaboration between**

conciliation  
resources



Quaker Peace  
& Social Witness

**Supported by  
Misereor/Germany and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency**

<b>SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>THE FIRST PROD: PUSH AND PULL FACTORS .....</b>	<b>6</b>
PUSH FACTORS .....	6
PULL FACTORS .....	8
<i>The Amnesty Act.....</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Information about home .....</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Possibility of education .....</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Possibility of a better life .....</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>Suffering of the Acholi population .....</i>	<i>11</i>
<b>THE DECISION TO RETURN: THE ROLE OF INFORMATION .....</b>	<b>11</b>
STARTING THEM THINKING: BACKGROUND INFORMATION .....	11
<i>Amnesty .....</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>The International Criminal Court .....</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Fate of former members of the Lord's Resistance Army.....</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>Status of peace initiatives .....</i>	<i>13</i>
TOWARDS A FINAL DECISION: SPECIFIC, PERSONAL INFORMATION .....	14
<i>The situation and status of their own families and communities .....</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>The fate and lifestyles of specific, individual colleagues .....</i>	<i>14</i>
HELPING THEM MAKE A DECISION: CHANNELS OF COMMUNICATION .....	15
<i>Radio .....</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Direct contact with civilians.....</i>	<i>16</i>
<b>ENCOURAGING OTHERS TO RETURN: ENSURING THE RETURN PROCESS</b>	
<b>WORKS.....</b>	<b>16</b>
LACK OF ASSISTANCE.....	17
THE AMNESTY COMMISSION .....	17
WHY THESE PROBLEMS MATTER.....	18
<b>RECOMMENDATIONS.....</b>	<b>19</b>

## **SUMMARY**

In 2005 it seemed as if conflict transformation and peacebuilding efforts in northern Uganda were more and more sidelined while a military approach to end the war between the Government of Uganda (GoU) and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) became increasingly dominant. In this environment, Conciliation Resources (CR) and Quaker Peace & Social Witness (QPSW) together with their partners set out to assess the actual impact of ongoing peacebuilding processes and their potential to contribute to ending the war in the LRA-affected areas. The research confirmed that peacebuilding efforts in northern Uganda are contributing significantly to an overall environment conducive to end the war. It suggests that the Amnesty Act, the Ugandan Amnesty Commission and other peace and reconciliation programmes are in fact an unsung success story. They have played and can continue to play a vitally important role in working towards an end to this long-running conflict and need to be sustained and strengthened.

In this context this report examines options that can contribute to a peaceful resolution of the conflict in northern Uganda through a strategy of helping middle-ranking LRA commanders choose to return to civilian life.

It is based on field research carried out in Gulu district between May and August 2005. We interviewed 26 former LRA commanders about their return, and particularly about the process they went through to make a decision to return.

Middle-ranking LRA commanders are an important group to consider, particularly since when they return they often bring others with them. In our sample, each commander brought with him/her an average of 22 other members of the LRA, of whom an average 50 per cent were fighters, the other 50 per cent being women and children.

We believe that in December 2005 there were around 30 middle-ranking and senior LRA commanders still in the bush. Of these, five have been indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC). Four are still alive, and one is believed to be dead.

Our research has found that a decision to return home is often well-thought through, and suggests that three factors are especially important in influencing LRA commanders to return home:

1. background information
2. specific personal information
3. opportunity

The study confirms the important role of communication with the LRA, and suggests that while radio broadcasts are the most accessible source of information for LRA members, it is not necessarily the only one. Telephone conversations, letters, notes and personal contacts between LRA commanders and members of their families and communities are often cited as other factors in influencing their decision to return.

To conclude, this report makes various recommendations on how the process of encouraging middle-ranking LRA commanders to return can be strengthened.

This report is not intended to be a rigid prescription of how this process can be taken forward. Rather, it was written to deepen the analysis of the conflict dynamics and provide a working document for practitioners in northern Uganda and southern Sudan to inform their peacebuilding efforts. It is not an academic paper. We are well aware that it throws up as many questions as it answers. Where this is the case, we hope to engage with other peace actors in exploring these further. Where we do make recommendations, these are offered modestly as an initial contribution to what we hope will be an ongoing conversation. Building peace is necessarily a creative process, and we invite you to join us in developing these ideas further.

## **METHODOLOGY**

We interviewed 26 respondents in Acholiland between May and August 2005. All were former commanders in the LRA, holding ranks between Warrant Officer and Major at the time that they left the LRA or were captured. 20 were male and six female. 22 returned from the LRA voluntarily and four were captured. They returned between 1989 and 2004, although the majority (73 per cent) had returned since 2000, and 50 per cent of the total had returned within the last two years.

The interviews were semi-structured and focused around four key themes:

1. the process of leaving the LRA
2. push and pull factors bringing them out of the LRA
3. access to information while in the LRA
4. the process of returning home

The interviews were conducted one-on-one with individuals who had been approached by the research team on the basis of a previously compiled list. They were entirely voluntary and the interviewee could choose to discontinue the interview at any time.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The LRA is a rebel group operating mainly in northern Uganda and southern Sudan, but recently also in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). It is well-known for the atrocities committed against the civilian population in the affected areas. In addition the population in northern Uganda also suffers from the humanitarian consequences of war and forced displacement as well as at the hands of the government forces (UPDF) deployed ostensibly to protect them.

The military strategy, pursued by the Government of Uganda for almost 20 years, has so far failed to end the conflict by defeating the LRA. High-profile efforts at engaging the LRA in peace talks have often focused on the highest levels of LRA leadership. At the time of writing, the most recent significant mediation initiative, led by Betty Bigombe, appears to be seriously stalled.

Given the apparent reluctance of both the top LRA leadership to engage in serious peace talks (now only reinforced by the recent issuing of arrest warrants by the International Criminal Court), and the corresponding lack of commitment by senior government officials and the President of Uganda to fully engage in a mediation/negotiation process, it seems unlikely that the conflict will be ended by either the current military approach or a high profile mediation effort alone.

Another option is therefore to consider how we can best reach out to, and engage with, those members of the LRA who could potentially be persuaded to return. In order to do this, we need to better understand the thinking and motivations of those who have left the bush voluntarily in the past, and have thus chosen to abandon further

violence. Developing such an understanding will help us respond better to those members of the LRA currently in a similar position. The research outlined in this paper is an attempt to contribute to such an understanding.

No truly accurate figures for the number of members of the LRA exist, but most current estimates from a variety of different sources range between 400 and 1,500. It is a rebel force made up primarily of abductees, often children, who have – at least initially - been forced to fight. Although many are now adults, most probably share the experience of forced recruitment and thus are not part of the LRA through their own choice. Given this experience, the harsh conditions of life in the LRA and other ‘push factors, many of them are potentially open to the concept of voluntary return if the conditions are right.

Middle-ranking LRA commanders, who form the focus of this study, are a particularly important group to consider. Unlike the highest-ranking commanders, who are less likely to contemplate a voluntary return because they have now been indicted by the ICC, middle-ranking commanders may still be open to that possibility.

## **THE FIRST PROD: PUSH AND PULL FACTORS**

Life in the LRA is not easy. Most people in the LRA were abducted. Although it often seems as if some eventually choose to remain partly voluntarily<sup>1</sup> within the LRA, for most of our respondents, the primary factors keeping them in the LRA were fear of death or physical punishment for themselves or their families should they try to escape and fail to do so.

However, there are also a number of other push and pull factors which encourage them to leave the LRA. Push factors are negative conditions and influences within the LRA, which prompt individuals to consider leaving. Pull factors are those attractive conditions and influences outside the LRA which can encourage people to leave.

Respondents were asked to identify the five most significant push and pull factors that influenced their decision to leave and to rank them according to their relative importance.

### **Push factors**

These are factors which respondents identified as pushing them out of the LRA.

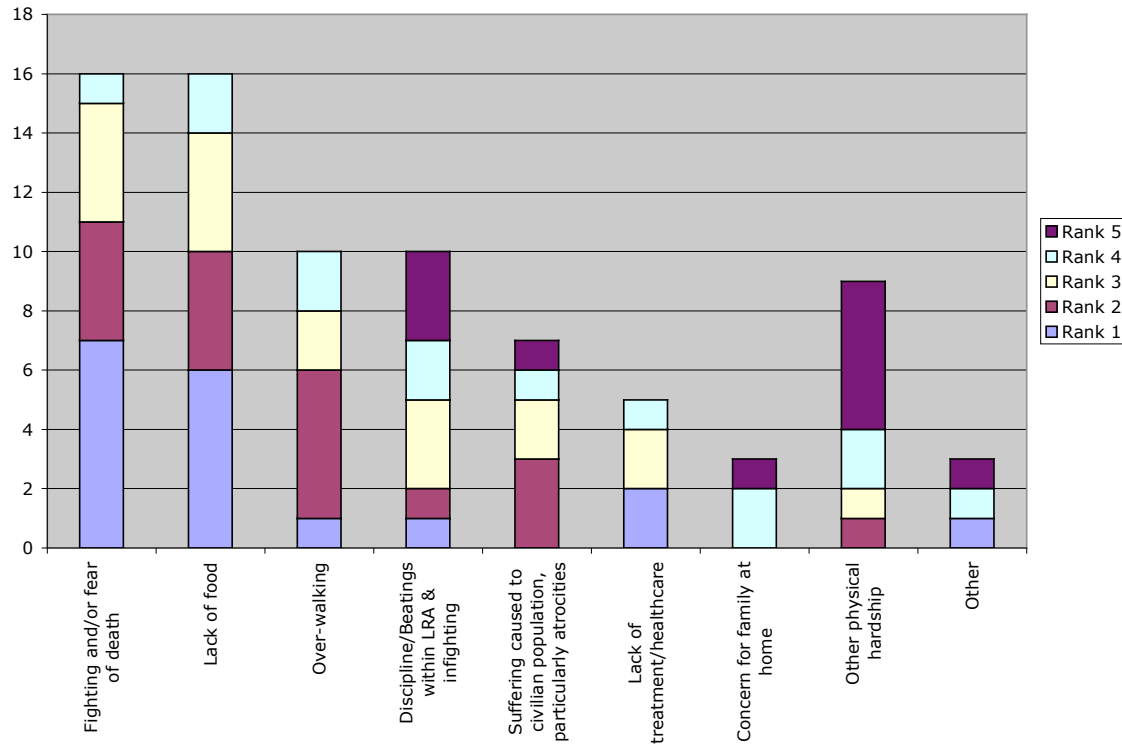
The three most significant factors were:

1. fighting and/or fear of death
2. lack of food
3. over-walking

---

<sup>1</sup> The concept of voluntarism is a difficult one applied to people being in the LRA as compliance with the group’s violent behaviour is often part of a survival strategy for individuals.

The table and charts below illustrate the various push factors identified by our respondents, and show the number of interviewees who ranked this factor in each position of importance relative to other push factors identified:



Factor identified	Number of interviewees who placed this in position:					Total
	1	2	3	4	5	
Fighting and/or fear of death	7	4	4	1	0	16
Lack of food	6	4	4	2	0	16
Over-walking	1	5	2	2	0	10
Discipline/Beatings within LRA & infighting	1	1	3	2	3	10
Suffering caused to civilian population, particularly atrocities	0	3	2	1	1	7
Lack of treatment/healthcare	2	0	2	1	0	5
Concern for family at home	0	0	0	2	1	3
Other physical hardship	0	1	1	2	5	9
Other	1	0	0	1	1	3

Although it did not feature in the ranking exercise, several respondents spoke during the interview of how a growing disillusionment with the LRA also prompted them to start thinking about returning home. In particular, they spoke of how they had lost faith in Kony's claims that they were on the verge of overthrowing the government.

### **Pull factors**

These are factors which respondents identified as attracting them back to their communities or society outside the LRA.

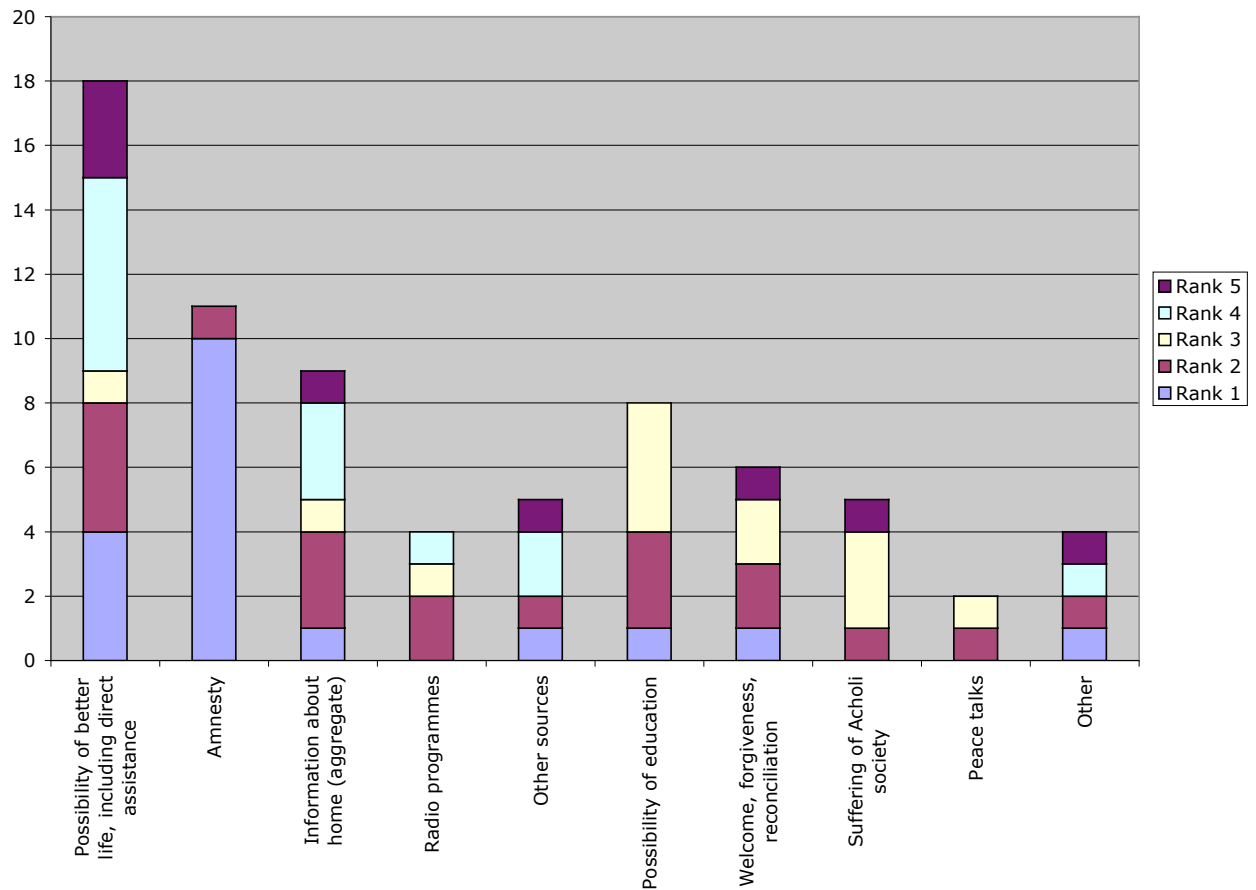
The most significant factors were:

1. information about home
2. amnesty
3. possibility of education

As a general factor, the possibility of a better life ranked higher than all three of these factors, but was articulated in so many diverse ways that there were no clear trends indicating that any particular aspect of a better life was more significant than others (for example clothing, shelter, warmth and training were all mentioned). However, the overall emphasis on this aspect, particularly when combined with the number who mentioned the value of education, indicates a substantial degree of foresight and planning for the future on the part of LRA commanders, and a perspective that extends beyond their immediate needs for survival.

The table and charts below illustrate the various pull factors identified by our respondents, and show the number of interviewees who ranked this factor in each position of importance relative to other pull factors identified:





Factor identified	Number of interviewees who placed this in position:					Total
	1	2	3	4	5	
Possibility of better life, including direct assistance	4	4	1	6	3	18
Amnesty	10	1	0	0	0	11
Information about home (aggregate)	1	3	1	3	1	9
Radio programmes	0	2	1	1	0	4
Other sources	1	1	0	2	1	5
Possibility of education	1	3	4	0	0	8
Welcome, forgiveness, reconciliation	1	2	2	0	1	6
Suffering of Acholi society	0	1	3	0	1	5
Peace talks	0	1	1	0	0	2
Other	1	1	0	1	1	4

### ***The Amnesty Act***

Amnesty was the single most significant pull factor. The Amnesty Act, which came into effect in January 2000, guarantees that every Ugandan who took up arms against the Government of Uganda after January 1986 but now renounces rebellion, will enjoy immunity from prosecution for these acts. Of those interviewed who returned after the Amnesty Act came into effect, 58 per cent selected amnesty as an important pull factor, and all but one of these placed it in first place. The amnesty works as a pull factor because respondents believed that it would guarantee them immunity from prosecution for all their actions while in the LRA, thus helping ensure a reasonable standard of living (i.e. they will not be imprisoned) upon their return.

However, despite the significance of amnesty as a pull factor, actual knowledge of the amnesty among respondents was extremely limited. The commanders generally knew of its existence, and that it meant that they would not be prosecuted for their actions whilst in the LRA. However, they did not understand the process of applying for amnesty, and were thus reliant upon others to guide them through that process. The potential of the amnesty as a pull factor has recently been weakened by the investigations and indictments of the International Criminal Court, which means that amnesty is no longer applicable to all. The involvement of the ICC in Uganda has also created confusion among the LRA over who can still benefit from the amnesty.

### ***Information about home***

Nine respondents identified receiving 'information about home' as one of their top five pull factors. Of these, four used the radio as a primary means of accessing this information, while five used other sources, like the telephone, letters and personal contacts.

These numbers may appear small, but this is partly a reflection of some of the weaknesses of the ranking system, during which respondents perhaps did not consider all possibilities. In the discussions, it became apparent that information and knowledge of life outside the LRA were indeed vital factors for the majority of respondents, even if they initially failed to rank it as one of their top five pull factors.

The information that LRA commanders take into account when deciding whether to leave the LRA can be split into two categories:

1. background information that helps them make their initial decision on whether it is worth thinking about leaving the LRA
2. more specific, personal information that will influence their final decision

See page 11 for the importance of accessing suitable information.

### ***Possibility of education***

Commanders are interested in the possibilities of education both for themselves and their children. The importance of education illustrates the long-term forward-looking nature of decisions about return. It is also one of the areas where returned

commanders feel most let down after their return, in the sense that the expected opportunities for education are not available. (See pp. 16–18.)

### ***Possibility of a better life***

Although the highest ranked category overall, the break-down of what this means in reality across numerous sub-categories of assistance makes it difficult to identify any particular trends or areas where greater attention is required. However, as with access to education, this is also an area in which there is a huge gap between expectations prior to return and assistance actually received.

### ***Suffering of the Acholi population***

The suffering caused to the Acholi civilian population in northern Uganda featured as both a push and a pull factor. Those who identified it as a push factor focused on the compulsion upon them to commit atrocities or to kill civilians. Those who identified it as a pull factor, placed more emphasis on recognising the problems that the LRA is causing for the civilian population and wanting to return home in order to assist their communities. Both approaches, but the latter in particular, suggest a degree of compassion amongst LRA commanders.

## **THE DECISION TO RETURN: THE ROLE OF INFORMATION**

The information that LRA commanders receive in the bush plays a crucial role in determining the decision to return home. Our research shows that two types of information are significant: background information that sets the general context for considering return; and specific, personal information that determines a final decision to return. In the first category, information regarding the ICC, the Amnesty Act, and the fate and lifestyles of former members of the LRA in general are the most important areas of concern to LRA commanders. However, in order to take a final decision to return, commanders often require specific information on their own families and communities, and on the fate and lifestyle of particular ex-members of the LRA who are known to them personally.

The means by which this information is conveyed is also highly important. While radio undoubtedly reaches the greatest number of LRA fighters and is the most accessible source of information, its impact on the actual decision to leave the LRA is limited unless its messages are reinforced by information from individuals who are personally known to them.

### **Starting them thinking: Background information**

Commanders start to think about leaving the LRA when they are sufficiently convinced that there is a generally favourable climate to do so. Our research identified four factors as particularly significant at this stage: the amnesty, the ICC, the fate of other former LRA fighters, and the status of peace talks/efforts.

## **Amnesty**

Amnesty was identified above as the most significant pull factor.

Approximately two-thirds of respondents said that their primary knowledge about the amnesty came through the radio. One third said their knowledge came through other channels like community messaging, posters etc.

However, despite the significance of the amnesty as a pull factor, knowledge of the amnesty among respondents was extremely limited. Amongst the LRA in the bush, the vast majority appear to have at least heard of the amnesty. However, there then appear to be three categories of individuals:

1. those who do not believe in the amnesty
2. those who have heard about the amnesty but do not understand its significance or how it can apply to them
3. those who have a good grasp of the amnesty and its implications.

Many do not believe in the amnesty because of the successful anti-amnesty propaganda conducted by the top leadership of the LRA. They are regularly told that the amnesty is a government tool, and that those returnees they hear on the radio are killed after their voices have been recorded.

Those in the second category have generally heard about the amnesty over the radio, but fail to fully understand. Prior to the start of the investigations of the ICC, the main points of confusion concerned:

1. confusion with other amnesties offered to other Ugandan rebellions
2. concern about the fate of those who had left this/other rebellions under an amnesty and been killed
3. a false belief, but prevalent among many, that the amnesty applies only in Uganda, and that those who give themselves up within the territory of Sudan are unable to benefit from its provisions.

The emergence of the ICC as a key actor in the north, and in particular the issuing of indictments, has further muddied waters which were already unclear for many LRA commanders.

Almost all those in category 3, who had a good grasp of the amnesty whilst still in the bush, had gained this understanding through face-to-face meetings with key individuals who were able to explain the amnesty to them, most notably the religious and traditional leaders.

## **The International Criminal Court**

The ICC is a significant factor in deterring voluntary return by LRA commanders. Even before indictments were issued many respondents demonstrated greater knowledge about the ICC than they did about the amnesty, apparently mainly because Kony and the

top LRA leadership are much more inclined to talk about the ICC, while spreading confusion over the amnesty. The ICC acts as a deterrent to return in three principal ways:

During the time of our research, indictments for the LRA leadership were widely anticipated. As a result, there was a growing fear even among middle and lower ranking LRA commanders that they will be arrested and prosecuted. This is played upon by the LRA leadership. In October 2005 five arrest warrants have been unsealed. However, the lack of clear and easily accessible information emanating from the ICC to date, means that many who have not been indicted remain uncertain about their future should they choose to return. It is hard to reassure them about what to expect when coming out since public messages of which laws and courts take precedence when, and who has the power to decide, remain inconsistent.

Secondly, the ICC paradoxically reinforces a belief in Kony and his power. Commanders and many other returnees have reported that Kony has for a long time predicted that warrants would be issued for his arrest and that he would be pursued by international troops. That the former is now the case has only reinforced an already powerful belief in his foresight and all-knowingness amongst LRA in the bush.

The ICC's intervention has served to reinforce mistrust of the government. Despite their lack of clear and detailed information, LRA commanders are acutely aware of the tensions between the ICC and the Amnesty Act, and many see this as another example of the Ugandan Government (GoU) acting in bad faith and demonstrating that they should not be trusted. The fact that so far neither Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) soldiers nor government officials have been indicted only reinforces this impression.

### ***Fate of former members of the Lord's Resistance Army***

In starting to think about return, many commanders are interested in the fate of former colleagues in the LRA who have returned. At this stage, they are interested in general information about returnees. They are primarily interested in:

1. whether they are still alive
2. whether they are indeed immune from prosecution
3. their current quality of life.

This information is gained primarily through two channels:

1. radio programmes
2. messages directly from communities.

### ***Status of peace initiatives***

Many respondents mentioned the status of peace initiatives as being important to their decision to return, and also mentioned that it would be important to their colleagues who remain in the bush. While peace initiatives are seen to be ongoing, more commanders are likely to consider a voluntary return.

It appears that this is closely related to the key question of trust. Peace initiatives help create a general atmosphere in which there appears to be a greater degree of goodwill towards LRA members on the part of the government. Under such conditions, voluntary return becomes for many a more palatable option.

### **Towards a final decision: Specific, personal information**

Background information can satisfy LRA commanders that the conditions for return are generally favourable. However, before taking a final decision, most sought further, more specific information, which determined their final decision. At this stage, they were primarily interested in two types of information:

1. the situation and status of their own families and communities
2. the fate and lifestyles of specific, individual colleagues personally known to them, who have previously left the LRA.

#### ***The situation and status of their own families and communities***

Accurate, reliable information about their own families often appears crucial at this stage of the decision-making process. This information is received through two main routes: firstly, recent abductees from the commanders' home areas are asked to provide information on the situation there and any news of the families; secondly, commanders make direct and indirect contact with families and community members.

Conditions at home can influence a decision to return in a variety of ways. Generally, poor conditions at home and in the community are a disincentive to return, as commanders (as indicated above) at least partly base their decision on a vision of their own future. However, many respondents cited that their motivation for returning stemmed from a sense of obligation to provide for family members when they heard that they found themselves in extremely difficult situations. Thus, whilst poor living conditions within the community or society as a whole act mainly as a dissuasive force, when applied in an extreme way to a commander's family, they can have the opposite effect. However, if the suffering of a commander's family is perceived to be a direct result of action by the UPDF or Local Defence Units (LDUs), (e.g. human rights abuses perpetrated by these groups) this increases their fear of return and thus remains a dissuasive factor.

#### ***The fate and lifestyles of specific, individual colleagues***

Commanders generally have broad information about how other commanders who have returned have been received and treated. However, before they make a final decision about return, it appears to be important to many to personally verify this information with individuals whom they know and trust. This process takes place either through personal contact (by telephone or face-to-face) or through the services of a trusted intermediary. Essentially, the commanders wish to verify the same information as specified above (that they are alive, immune from prosecution and living a relatively comfortable life). It appears though that at this stage the personal contact is essential for the trust that it enables, and because it allows the opportunity for a two-way

dialogue and for the commander contemplating return to ask the questions on his/her mind.

### **Helping them make a decision: Channels of communication**

Having identified the information that is important to commanders in the LRA, it is also important to understand how that information has been and should be conveyed.

The respondents were asked about their access to information whilst in the LRA. 92 per cent identified the radio as an important source of information, 62 per cent individuals and communities, and 31 per cent Kony's spirits<sup>2</sup>. External contacts (often active supporters of the LRA, often in other countries) were an important source of information for 23 per cent of respondents.

#### **Radio**

The radio is obviously the most accessible source of information about the outside world for those in the LRA, and as such is important. However, as far as decisions about return go, it is not necessarily the most important one.

Amongst those we interviewed, Radio Mega FM in Gulu, Radio Uganda, and the BBC World Service were listened to in almost equal proportions. The *Dwog Cen Paco (Come Back Home)*<sup>3</sup> programme on Radio Mega FM was the most popular programme while our respondents were still within the LRA.

Radio Mega is the station of choice for those who can receive it, but it is limited by the fact that it broadcasts mainly across northern Uganda, and cannot be received in many areas in southern Sudan. Here, the LRA listens to Radio Uganda and the BBC, although neither of these stations carries much information about northern Uganda.

Radio broadcasts are important for helping members of the LRA keep in touch with the wider world, and for providing them with background information on the amnesty, the ICC and former colleagues. However, they carry a number of disadvantages: the effectiveness of many programmes is countered by the spread of propaganda within the LRA; the information carried is not detailed enough to inform the final decisions of commanders to leave the LRA; often there is no coherence across different radio programmes and information from one programme is contradicted by information from another; a lack of batteries can easily disrupt listening; access to radios is often limited only to officers; and successful programmes tend to provoke a crack-down within the LRA on radio ownership.

---

<sup>2</sup> Kony claims, and many in the LRA believe his claims, that he is able to communicate directly with certain spirits. He then passes on the information that he receives in this manner to others in the LRA.

<sup>3</sup> *Dwog Cen Paco* is a radio programme aimed at encouraging LRA still in the bush to return home. Former members of the LRA who have returned speak on the radio in an attempt to reassure their colleagues that they are alive, well, and being treated reasonably, and to persuade them that it is also safe for them to return.

### ***Direct contact with civilians***

As we have been aware for some time, there is a considerable degree of direct contact between the civilian population and members of the LRA. This occurs in various ways:

1. family members have the phone numbers of relatives in the LRA and vice versa
2. members of the LRA at times stay quite close to the camps and gardens and meet civilians without planning; indeed at least one mentioned that he used to come and stay in camps, and no-one would notice
3. LRA commanders release women and children prior to their own return, both to test the waters and convey information.

Direct and indirect personal contacts are valuable for a number of reasons. Firstly, they allow the possibility of two-way communication, and give the chance to ask questions and clarify issues in a manner that radio and letters do not. Secondly, because of their confidential nature, Kony and other senior commanders are unable to organize meetings to deliberately discredit the information being provided as they do with radio programmes. Thirdly, such personal contacts are potentially open to all and not just to those who can access the radio.

At the moment space for such contacts is restricted. Possibilities are physically limited by LRA attacks on civilians, particularly when moving further from the camps, and by the UPDF's restrictions on the movement of civilians in northern Uganda. Furthermore, the tendency of the security forces and the government to classify all such communication with the LRA as 'collaboration' severely restricts the political space for contacts and conversations. Almost all respondents identified the need to open up space to allow them and others to make contact with former colleagues/relatives/friends in the bush as crucial to a sustained process of voluntary return.

### **ENCOURAGING OTHERS TO RETURN: ENSURING THE RETURN PROCESS WORKS**

This research considered the experience of our respondents' return home primarily with a view to assessing lessons to be learnt to encourage future returns. It is from this standpoint that we make the following comments.

Assessing current return processes, the two most important lessons to take into account for encouraging future returns were:

1. Many respondents were disappointed with the experience of their return and the assistance they have received. This disillusionment is communicated to those remaining in the bush and thus discourages future return.
2. Many respondents have found the Amnesty Commission and the amnesty process difficult to understand and deal with, and have not received the proper support or documentation. Again, this information is communicated to those remaining in the bush.



## **Lack of assistance**

As mentioned above, many returned commanders are dissatisfied with the assistance they receive after their return, and believe there to be a substantial gap between what they were promised before their return and the reality thereafter. The biggest single complaint from our respondents concerned their lack of access to the World Food Programme (WFP) food assistance. It appears that this occurs for three primary reasons:

1. Many returnees are not on WFP lists and being on the list is necessary to receive aid. Information about how to get onto these lists is often not provided and adequate help not offered.
2. Others are not entitled to WFP assistance because they live within Gulu municipality, an area that is generally not served by the WFP. However, the returnees do not understand this distinction.
3. There is confusion over how and where returnees should apply for assistance. Some are told they should go through the reception centres, others through the camps.

Additionally, many commanders felt they were coaxed out of the bush with promises of assistance that have never materialized. As well as a lack of food, they particularly resent the lack of opportunities for education for themselves and their families, and the difficulties of engaging in some kind of economic activity.

Finally, several commanders felt that assistance currently focuses too much on women. In particular, they refer to the emphasis on assistance for 'child mothers'. Whether or not this is the case, the perception that it is so will also be a deterrent to other commanders, since the vast majority of them are men.

Three important lessons can be drawn:

1. The disillusionment experienced is communicated back to others in the bush, affecting future returns.
2. Those engaged in dialogue with the LRA (whether formally or informally) must pay much greater attention to ensuring that they do not generate false expectations as this damages both the chances of future returns, and their own integrity, and jeopardizes their future role.
3. The assistance currently offered is often seen as mainly centre-based and reintegration support for returnees once back in their communities is perceived as being weak and often ineffective.

## **The Amnesty Commission**

With the issuing of ICC arrest warrants, the Amnesty Commission is now operating in a substantially different political environment from the one which prevailed at the time that these interviews were conducted.

However, the research identified several key practical difficulties around the amnesty as LRA commanders understand and relate to it that are still relevant in this new context, namely:

1. Returnees do not understand the amnesty process, so do not know what to do or where to go, but rely on others to direct them, but it appears that often others may not know either.
2. Some have difficulties in filling in forms to get their amnesty certificates.
3. Many of those who have applied have not yet received their amnesty certificates.
4. Even those who have received certificates have not received the promised assistance packages.

Even if much of this (particularly point 4) occurs through a combination of disorganization and lack of resources, the effect is still to generate a belief that the government has acted, or is acting, in bad faith.

### **Why these problems matter**

There is no doubt that the difficulties and disappointments that returning commanders (and other returnees) face are communicated back to and shared with those who remain in the bush. We have emphasized how much the opinions and advice of former colleagues matter to those commanders contemplating return. A failure to provide for the needs of returnees thus generates a degree of resentment, and certainly disillusionment, both of which are communicated back to those still contemplating return, and which therefore serve as dissuasive factors.

Closely linked with this is the fact that many returned commanders believed they were promised much more before they came out. This has led some to conclude that not only the government, but also community and religious leaders, as well as national and international NGOs have acted in bad faith. This could potentially lead to a severe erosion of trust which will hamper further efforts both to encourage return and also to engage the LRA in wider peace processes. This also puts intermediaries and others actively engaged in the process at additional and severe risk.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Focus on creating an enabling environment for return**

Time, energy and resources should be directed towards creating and sustaining an environment for return by addressing the issues and concerns raised in this paper. In particular we suggest the following steps as a framework for creating an enabling environment:

1. The first prod: where possible, strengthen, reinforce, and make more visible the push and pull factors that can cause that initial contemplation of trying to leave the LRA.
2. Starting them thinking: ensure provision of, and access to, the background information that enables commanders to start thinking in more detail about return.
3. Towards a final decision: ensure provision of, and access to, the specific, detailed information that enables commanders to move towards a final decision to return.
4. Encouraging others to return: the return process must both work well and be seen to work well in order to encourage others to return.

These tasks should not be seen as the exclusive prerogative of any individual or set of actors. Civil society should be permitted and empowered to talk to the LRA as much as groups or individuals who are officially sanctioned by the government.

### **Recognize the importance of accurate and trusted information**

Our research has already demonstrated that most decisions by commanders to surrender are based upon a careful consideration of the facts available to them, and on their own assessment of the situation. Civil society can play an important role in closing the information gap by facilitating the availability and flow of the information needed to make such decisions.

### **Pursue a multi-pronged approach to disseminating information to the LRA**

To disseminate information to the LRA, a three-pronged approach should be employed, building upon the experience and contacts that exist, namely by:

1. continuing, improving upon, and expanding radio programmes;
2. investigating the possibilities of greater use of posters, letters and written communications with the LRA;
3. strengthening, coordinating and creating space for civilian contact with the LRA.

## **Develop and promote genuine and coherent messages**

An enabling environment, and a multi-pronged approach for disseminating information, require messages that are clear, consistent, and that reflect reality. These must include clarity on the availability of amnesty, the process of return, and on what can be expected in terms of assistance and quality of life post-return. The Government of Uganda, the Amnesty Commission, and the ICC all have essential roles to play in determining the content of these messages, whilst other actors should ensure that these messages are accurately and faithfully communicated whenever possible and appropriate.

## **Continue to use radio programmes, but improve these and spread their reach to southern Sudan**

Our research has clearly identified the importance of radio programmes as a source of information for those in the LRA. However, there are a number of ways in which this aspect of a strategy for communicating with the LRA can be improved:

1. The reach of programmes directly relating to the conflict, and in the local language is limited. Those based in Sudan often cannot access these programmes. Radio programming could be started in south Sudan to reach members of the LRA based there, or assistance could be offered to Mega FM and others to allow them to expand their coverage. Other options include broadcasting reviewed/adapted Radio Mega programmes on other stations such as Radio Uganda, Radio Sudan and the BBC.
2. Some vital pieces of information are currently unclear. More careful thought needs to be given to broadcasting coherent information about the ICC, the Amnesty Commission and Amnesty Act.
3. Messages are not clear and consistent across programmes. Without imposing censorship, Mega FM and others should carefully monitor the accuracy of information they broadcast and the consistency across all of their programming.
4. The radio should be used to answer some of the frequently asked questions and attempt to address certain misunderstandings within the LRA, in particular: that you are ineligible for amnesty if you surrender/escape within Sudan and that if you surrender/escape anywhere within Uganda outside Acholiland you are likely to be killed. Returned commanders can help to identify the issues in question.

## **Recognize the importance of personal contacts and seek to open space to facilitate these**

The most significant finding of this research has perhaps been the importance of information from sources other than the radio in helping LRA commanders to make their final decision to return home. While personal and community-level links seem to play an important part when collecting information, their use and exact impact has so far been hardly analysed. Developing a better understanding of these mechanisms will be integral to a successful strategy to bring out middle-ranking LRA commanders.

However, this is potentially an extremely delicate and risky undertaking. Anyone who communicates with the LRA does so at a degree of risk. Threats from the LRA are possibly greater since the issuing of arrest warrants by the ICC. The risk of being seen as a collaborator when directly communicating with the LRA is real and thus even for communication in the form of posters, letters or via telephone, a certain degree of buy-in from the Government of Uganda and the UPDF is necessary in order to open up the necessary physical and legal space. This must be accompanied by increased protection of civilians in general, and the ones at higher risk in particular.

The experiences so far show that a comprehensive approach to ending the war in the LRA affected areas needs a strong commitment of respect for separate roles and responsibilities of different actors. As indicated in this report, there are several initiatives which are best done by civil society actors, while others are better undertaken by the state or supra-national organizations. It is important that the various fields of work are respected as separate but complementary efforts which are not politicized or exploited for personal gains.

Supporting peace committees at a local, grassroots level, with members who are trained in dialogue skills, and also with sound understandings of the ICC, the Amnesty Act, and the return process may be one way of supporting a first point of contact.

Our research also indicated the significance to many commanders of an individual who is well respected, has a good reputation and acts with integrity. Religious and traditional leaders were mentioned in this regard. Appointing one of these in a (formal or informal) coordination role could strengthen the confidence of commanders in such a process.

### **Develop clarity about justice approaches, recognising the importance of amnesty as a tool for encouraging return**

The ICC indictments have undoubtedly been a setback to encouraging return. It is unrealistic to expect commanders to return voluntarily when they are unsure whether they may be imprisoned upon their return. The value of all the above methods of communication is severely undermined if they cannot be used to communicate clear, accurate and truthful messages about the likely future of those who return.

Therefore there is an imperative for all relevant actors to reach agreement on the future that awaits middle-ranking LRA commanders who voluntarily return. This would require a clear statement of intent from the ICC that currently there are no plans to issue further indictments. In addition an open and frank strategy dialogue between the Government of Uganda, the ICC, the Amnesty Commission, traditional and religious leaders as well as civil society representatives from the war-affected areas is needed. Any agreement reached needs to be clear to all who may communicate with the LRA. The role of the Amnesty Commission and the content of the Amnesty Act should be considered carefully in the light of ICC indictments, and the capacity of the Amnesty Commission strengthened to allow them to play a more active role.

### **Use former LRA commanders without politicising them**

Most of the respondents believe that they potentially have a unique role to play in helping persuade their former colleagues to return, largely because of the personal relationship and trust that exists between them. Many volunteered their services in this regard. Potentially they represent a rich resource. A major challenge is how to use their knowledge and contacts without politicising them in the way that Sam Kolo and Kenneth Banya have been. Through their open support for national and local NRM politicians, for example by praising their role in the conflict, these two have lost credibility with and the trust of other former LRA combatants and those still in the bush.

Another unexplored avenue that could potentially be integrated into a strategy for communicating with the LRA is through the returned 'wives' of commanders who remain in the bush.

### **Consider use of letters**

Letters left at strategic locations in the past seem to have worked well as a means of conveying information to the LRA. This approach should be explored again in more detail, and developed as a regular line of communication.

### **Look seriously at the assistance given to returnees and particularly at education**

The assistance given to returnees and issues of quality of life are significant factors that influence decisions to return. Education remains a priority for many LRA commanders. Any strategy to encourage commanders to return must seriously consider current levels of assistance both directly to returnees, and also to the communities to which they are returning. Opportunities for comparative learning from similar experiences around the globe need to be identified and an exchange on the lessons learned encouraged.

### **Identify and engage with the risks and challenges**

There are undoubtedly risks to an approach that focuses on middle-ranking commanders, and these may increase if such an approach proves successful. Any attempts to translate these ideas into practical steps must engage seriously with a full risk assessment, both for those implementing the approach, and for those whom it is intending to influence.

## **QUAKER PEACE AND SOCIAL WITNESS**

Quaker Peace & Social Witness (QPSW) works with, and on behalf of Quakers in Britain to translate faith into action. Quakers are impelled by faith to make an active witness for peace and justice. The Quaker testimonies to equality, justice, peace, simplicity and truth are a challenge to alleviate suffering and seek positive social change.

The QPSW Uganda programme has been based in Gulu, northern Uganda, since 2000. We support local capacities for building peace and social justice through: support to local peacebuilding NGOs, CBOs and civil society; research and conflict analysis; policy and advocacy work nationally and internationally.

Quaker representatives at the United Nations in Geneva facilitate dialogue between diplomats and non-governmental organizations on human rights, disarmament and international development issues. In Britain, we engage with policymakers, raise public awareness, stimulate reflection and enable action for change on a range of peace and social issues.

### **Contact us under:**

David Newton, Representative, QPSW Uganda  
Plot 8 Olya Road, Gulu  
PO Box 609, Gulu  
Email: davidn@quaker.org.uk  
Tel. +256 (0)77 278 88 45

Joanna Wright, Africa Programme Manager  
Friends House, 173 Euston Road, London NW1 2BJ  
Email: joannaw@quaker.org.uk  
Tel. +44 (0) 20 7663 1075

## **CONCILIATION RESOURCES**

Conciliation Resources (CR) - An International Service For Conflict Resolution - supports groups working at different levels to prevent violence and transform armed conflict into opportunities for peace and development. CR engages with people to develop innovative solutions to social, economic and political problems related to armed conflict. While we provide opportunities for dialogue and improved relationships across conflict divides and at all social levels, we influence decision-makers to employ conflict transformation policies that limit militarization and include effective mechanisms for public participation. In addition CR supports peacemaking practice and policies by promoting comparative learning from peace processes around the world.

### **Contact us under:**

Bryn Higgs or Bjoern Eser, Uganda Programme Co-Directors  
173 Upper Street, London N1 1RG, UK  
Email: uganda@c-r.org  
Telephone: + 44 (0)20 7359 7728 ext 244/224