

Fighting History in Uganda

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Can the Cycle Be Broken?

by Mary Lou Klassen

Uganda still strikes me by its contrasts—even after seven years. The landscape is diverse, including almost all the geographic formations of Africa. A new visitor is struck by the beauty and fertility of this equatorial country, whose elevation and mountains give it an ideal climate. Colorful street life displays energy and vitality: piles of fruits and vegetables, traders with bright plastic wares, people of all ages in colorful garb walking and trading.

Its 24 million inhabitants are also diverse. There are three distinct people groups—the Bantu, Nilotic, and Central Sudanic—with many language subgroups. There are several ancient kingdoms whose kings still play a ceremonial role today, and traditional clan or village chiefs and elders are respected.

Uganda is the source of the “White Nile” (in Uganda, Victoria Nile), which begins in Lake Victoria and flows through the whole country, cutting it almost in half along a northwest/southeast line. While bridges and boats now cross the Nile routinely, the river’s impact as a traditional barrier between people groups continues to this day.

History

The British colonized Uganda and left English as the official language. While Swahili developed as a trade language in East Africa generally, it never took off in Uganda, which lacks a universal local language.

The first Anglican and Catholic missionaries came into Uganda from Lake Victoria in the south, as well as from the north via the Nile. A third religious force, represented by Muslim traders from the Indian Ocean

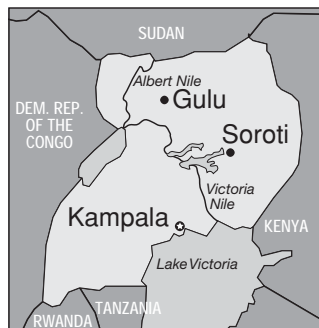
coast, also interacted with the peoples of Uganda and still have some influence. The missionaries who landed on the Lake Victoria shores immediately made their contacts through the King of Buganda, the largest local kingdom, which has enabled a close connection between religion and the state since that time.

As British rule ended in 1962, political parties formed in Uganda that had a distinctly religious and, to some extent, ethnic flavor. For example, Uganda People’s Congress, led by the first prime minister, Milton Obote, was perceived to be Anglican and the Democratic Party was seen to be supported by Catholics. Since independence, the behavior of the various leaders has also reflected their ethnic connections.

After the British left, Uganda became a republic with a president and a parliament, including an elected prime minister. The King of Buganda became the first president. After four years, Obote deposed all the traditional kings and made himself president.

Lam Oryem Cosmas’s article (see p. 4) narrates the postindependence history of violent regime change and unresolved issues. Obote and Idi Amin were leaders hailing from the “north” of Uganda, north of the Nile River, and Yoweri Museveni is from the western region, south and west of the Nile. Lam notes that dialogue resolved some of the northern conflicts in the early years of Museveni’s National Resistance Movement (NRM), as many fighters from former and rebel armies made peace with the NRM. There were also those who did not, some of whom joined the longest-lasting group, the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), led by Joseph Kony.

UGANDA



Three men transporting Mennonite Central Committee (MCC)-donated blankets by bicycle in northern Uganda were ambushed and two killed outside Kitgum, Uganda, February 5, 2004, by members of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), according to MCC workers.

The men were part of a team of 270 bicyclists helping to transport blankets to rural areas in war-torn northern Uganda, where the rebel LRA has been wreaking havoc and taking lives for the past 18 years.

Raymond Akena, 25, and Thomas Akena, 27, died in the attack outside Kitgum. The third man, Alex Ojera, 32, was abducted by the LRA and later rescued by the Ugandan army. The men, not MCC employees, were part of a local church-sponsored effort to distribute the blankets. MCC has made a financial contribution to the families of the deceased.

In six years of relief distributions in northern Uganda MCC "has never had an incident of this sort," MCC workers reported. Noting that violence has been a pattern for far too long in northern Uganda, MCC Africa program co-director, Tesfatsion Dalellew, called the deaths unfortunate and upsetting. "The efforts to disrupt the peace and destroy lives have continued," he said. "MCC continues to work for lasting peace in northern Uganda."

For more information about the situation in Uganda go to <http://www.mcc.org/uganda>.

—MCC News Service

Kony has a "worldview [steeped] in apocalyptic spiritualism and he uses fear and violence to both maintain control within the LRA and sustain the conflict" ("Behind the Violence," p. 4; see sidebar in this issue, p. 11). Most of Kony's fighters are children who have been forcibly inducted into the LRA through mind-numbing violence. While his political agenda is either unclear or unarticulated, his war is fought within the context of unresolved historical issues in the country: many northern people feel alienated from Museveni's government. It is easy to focus on the current irrationality of the LRA's methods and violence and forget the underlying historical factors at play. For long-term peace in Uganda these issues also need to be addressed.

In 1994, Betty Bigombe, the Minister for the Pacification of the North, and her team made the most significant attempt to resolve the conflict through dialogue. Despite achieving cease-fires and extensive face-to-face talks with Kony himself, the mission failed as a result of communication difficulties, alleged vested interests of certain high-ranking officers and politicians, Museveni's strict deadline of seven days for negotiations, and the LRA's turn to Sudan for weapons rearmament ("Behind the Violence," p. 6).

The arming of the LRA by the Sudanese government has been understood as one of the major factors in prolonging and intensifying this war. Khartoum saw this action as a kind of international "tit for tat" because of Uganda's unofficial support of and conduit of arms to the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA).

From 1994 to 2004 violence increased as approximately 25,000 children were abducted to become either brutalized fighters or one of many "wives" of commanders.

Internally Displaced Person Camps

In early 1997, the first "protected villages" (internally displaced person [IDP] camps) were set up. Their population has fluctuated: in periods of calm, people would test going back to their homes, while in times of violence, people would run back to these camps.

In December 1999 a peace deal between Uganda and Sudan was signed, withdrawing the latter's support for the LRA. This allowed Kampala and Khartoum to work out an arrangement in 2002 whereby the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) could move into Sudanese territory to rout out the LRA from their bases there in an incursion called Operation Iron Fist.

But the LRA were not defeated, just displaced, and they returned to Uganda with a vengeance, sending many more of the population into crowded and poorly serviced camps. It is sadly ironic that the LRA views those who go to these camps for safety as government collaborators and the government views those who choose to stay in their homes as rebel collaborators.

In June 2003 the LRA made a push south and east into new areas—the cultural regions of Teso and Lango. There were more displacements, abductions, and ambushes. The government supported the development of local militias in Teso and Lango. As of this writing, the LRA are mostly gone from Teso, though vicious attacks continue in Lango.

Romano Longole (see p. 6) points out another layer of complexity to the situation of violence in northern Uganda rooted in their sense of alienation from the central government. This was fueled dramatically by the opportunistic cattle-rustling activity of the Karimojong groups that live to the east of the Acholi, Lango, and Teso areas. This raiding had a huge economic impact as well as cultural implications, since cattle are used in the bride-price marriage traditions as well as in compensation negotiations for crimes.

In the context of Ugandan history, there are those who allege that this loss was not just an act of opportunism by the Karimojong, but something encouraged to further "defeat" those who had benefited from the former regimes. Longole's commentary reveals how easily small arms have moved throughout this region, though the SPLA might officially deny their role in this.

One controversial point he makes is regarding the recent arming of the local militias in Teso and Lango. While the militias together with the UPDF may have had some short-term success in pushing the LRA out of Teso as well as serving as a deterrent to the raiding Karimojong, there are many who fear that they may be a foundation stone for other violent conflicts in the future.

Religious Leaders Seek Peace

Throughout this conflict, many groups have worked at peacebuilding. One of the most prominent and outspoken is the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI), which formed out of peace prayer efforts of the Anglican, Catholic, and Muslim leadership in 1996. It was formally organized in 1998 and has continued to be a voice for dialogue and nonmilitaristic solutions.

A key success was advocating for an amnesty law allowing fighters, most of whom were recruited by force, to turn themselves in and receive resettlement assistance and immunity from prosecution. This is controversial, especially now since the government of Uganda has brought the top leadership of the LRA to the International Criminal Court (ICC) as its first case. The pieces from the ARLPI (p. 8) and Father Pius Richard Okiria (p. 8) highlight aspects of this debate.

The ARLPI also advocated that the government set up a presidential peace team and has consistently pursued the option of dialogue. At one point a brief cease-fire was declared from both sides, but it was uncoordinated and there were no significant meetings with rebel leadership. Trust is very low on both sides.

Currently, the climate in Uganda is tense. Since the military option has been deemed to have had “success” in the east and peace talks have “failed,” there is little space for discussing alternatives. While the religious leaders and many other community groups feel very dubious about the military option, it is the one that has the strongest “force.” Meanwhile, violent attacks continue, people continue to be displaced (over 1.2 million people are not living in their homes), and children sleep under town verandas for safety at night.

The Acholi people are particularly caught in a bind, as Lam points out: a militaristic approach in Acholi asks her children to take up arms against their brothers or sisters. While the initial grievances of history remain, any potential support for the LRA has evaporated because of the atrocities they commit.

So why does this senseless killing and suffering go on? Much of the rest of the country is unaware of what is going on and this “disinterest” is deepened by the history of violence and stereotyping. The government view spread in the local media assures the population that “they will ‘finish’ the bandits next week.” A recent and unprecedented unanimous resolution by Parliament that the north be declared a disaster area was overturned by the cabinet. The conflict is officially an “internal affair,” and other nations find it difficult to be involved or make suggestions lest they be attacked by the government for overstepping their diplomatic bounds.

Uganda has a high level of international support—over half of the government budget is donor funded. The president is charismatic and has been able to “sell” Uganda with some decent results in terms of development in the central and western parts of the country.

The “war on terror” has also been used to advantage, since the government of Uganda got the LRA listed as a terrorist organization. It is thus easy for the government to say that one cannot negotiate with terrorists, especially in this global climate.

The military solution continues to be the priority when both sides obviously continue to receive military hardware and assistance.

The church particularly, along with other groups, continues to play a central role in advocating for a peaceful situation, raising awareness of the problem, and binding up the wounds. Several groups have jointly set up centers to receive returnees. Many people do escape the LRA—some after a few days, others after several years. They all carry heavy burdens of trauma, violence, and suffering—they are both victims and perpetrators. Healing for them and the community will take years.

At this time, things seem particularly bleak. Yet, the religious leaders and others still struggle to imagine a different way—a non-violent way out of this darkness.

A Tradition of Reconciliation

The Luo people (of whom the Acholi are a part) have a foundational story of two brothers, Labongo and Gipir, who had a disagreement that ended up in the death of one of their children. So intense was their hatred that they performed a “ceremony of separation.” Bishop Macleod Baker Ochola II, a religious leader tirelessly advocating for peace, says this story has taught his people that these two brothers were very bad brothers because they could not forgive each other. He notes that the Acholi do not traditionally have capital punishment—murders and other crimes were resolved through compensation between clans. At times the offending clan gave a young girl to the victim’s clan as a basis for a new relationship.

The tradition of *mato oput* (reconciliation) energizes the community to seek forgiveness and restoration rather than revenge and more killing. For Christians, the example of Jesus and the nonviolent gospel also forms part of their thinking as religious leaders advocating for peace in a world gone mad with violence.

Mary Lou Klassen is MCC co-representative for Uganda, based in Kampala. Thanks to her also for compiling this issue.

Acholi Reconciliation: Mato Oput

The principle of conflict resolution in Acholi is to create reconciliation which brings the two sides together. Between individuals this involved elders, particularly the moral authority of the *Rwot kaka* (clan chief), investigating the circumstances, leading to an acceptance of responsibility for carrying out a wrong action and an indication of repentance. Then terms were laid down by the elders such as 10 cows or a girl for compensation implying potential for a future marriage, possibly elsewhere, producing replacement in the case of death and restoring a nexus of relationships. Then reconciliation occurred with the simultaneous drinking of a bitter root extract drink from a common calabash set on the ground—*mato oput*.

Between groups the process required a delegation of elders to investigate the fault and identify the cause and for those concerned to accept their responsibility. The acceptance of responsibility is a group acceptance—not so-&-so, son of X, but we have done this. Then the compensation is determined, traditionally cattle or girls, and lastly reconciliation occurs with the “bending of two spears” and *mato oput* . . .

In spite of their marginalisation from political authority, the *Rwodi-mo* continue on occasion informally to carry out reconciliation with a compensation element to the victim in addition to court decisions. This is to ensure restoration of relationships, which modern court proceedings neglect. Although rebels are seen to have rejected society, “if society now establishes the means of reconciliation, the rebels will accept that authority.”

—From Dr. Dennis Pain, “The Bending of Spears,” available at <http://www.km-net.org/>

Breaking the Cycle of Violence

by Lam Oryem Cosmas

It can also be said that Uganda is a land of plenty. This plenty has sustained us during all the turbulent years that befell our beloved land when violence consumed it.

Sir Winston Churchill, a British official flying across Uganda from south to north, coined the famous phrase “Pearl of Africa,” which since then has been the selling point of Uganda. It has complemented our motto, “For God and My Country.”

It can also be said that Uganda is a land of plenty. This plenty has sustained us during all the turbulent years that befell our beloved land when violence consumed it. I would like to narrate what has evolved into a cycle of violence, which must be broken for us as a country to realize sustainable peace and reconciliation.

It all began in 1966, when due to disagreement between the central government and the Buganda Kingdom, Prime Minister Dr. Apollo Milton Obote ordered the national army under the command of Idi Amin Dada to attack the king’s palace at Lubiri. This forced the king into exile and he never returned to Uganda. Then, the army turned the palace into a military barracks.

Violence was institutionalized as a response to political issues that required dialogue and understanding. The King of Buganda, writing from exile, summed up these experiences in a book, *The Desecration of My Kingdom*.

The second major event came in 1971, when Idi Amin led a bloody military coup that toppled Obote. This period became the epitome of violence in the history of our country. All tribes and categories of people were affected, thousands of people killed. Amin also attempted to export the violence to Tanzania. However, he was unsuccessful and finally defeated by the combined forces of the exiled Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA), supported by the Tanzanian People’s Defence Force, which ousted Idi Amin in April 1979.

Amin and his supporters, mainly from Sudan and his region of West Nile, fled to exile in Congo and Sudan. Though the defeat of Amin was celebrated, it was a short-lived celebration, and the years that followed were ugly for our country. The province of West Nile was destroyed by UNLA fighters, most of whom were victims of Amin’s brutality. The desire for revenge only perpetuated the violence.

Obote was overthrown by violence for the second time in July 1985 as a result of unre-

solved issues among former allies, the Langi and the Acholi within the UNLA. This violence brought General Tito Okello Lutwa to power. The National Resistance Army (NRA), using counterforce and violence, came to power in January 1986. The north and east of the country responded with violence. Dialogue resolved the violence in the east and partly in the north when the Uganda People’s Democratic Army (UPDA) under the leadership of Angelo Okello signed a peace accord with the government of Uganda in June 1988. Dialogue resolved the violence with the Uganda National Rescue Front. Dialogue and understanding brought home many people who had gone into political exile. Dialogue through Parliament and the constitution-writing process has achieved relative peace in many parts of our country.

Unfortunately, violence with and by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) has continued since 1989. Dialogue collapsed in 1994 and could not be revived in 2002 and 2003. Unfortunately, political violence has continued to create new exiles.

What Does This Mean to Us Ugandan Citizens?

The feeling of “chosen trauma” (reviving the trauma of past conflicts, magnifying enemy images and complicating current peace efforts) has engulfed whole communities and tribes. They justify acts of revenge for their victimization and identify fellow citizens as “the other” who deserve their suffering. For instance, most Acholi and Lango people felt it was justified to use “scorched earth” military tactics to destroy West Nile province, because “we, too, suffered at their hands.”

The same applied to the Muslim and Nubian communities, who were lumped together with Idi Amin and were seen as supporters and beneficiaries of his regime. When the NRA took over Kampala, all northerners were labeled “anya-nya” (killers who deserve to be killed). Many innocent people were killed in the most cruel way—being burnt with car tires around their necks.

Now, when the Lord’s Resistance Army has been devastating northern Uganda, Acholi-land in particular, the rest of the country seems not to mind. Since 1995, there have been mass killings, displacement into camps, amputation of limbs, mutilation of mouths

Wisdom from Uganda

“Peace comes not by spears’ tips, neither by the productivity of the gun, but the resolution of the heart” (Robert K. Rutaagi, p. 183).

“True peace doesn’t mean stationing soldiers in the village. True peace means the freedom of people to live together and respect each other. True peace is in our hearts and not based on the gun, it is based on the sense of humanity” (Daniel Omara Atubo, p. 184).

“People don’t care how much you know until they have known how much you love” (Robby Muhumuza, p. 151).

—From Godfrey E. N. Nsubuga, *Wells of Wisdom: Proverbs, Sayings, Poems, Maxims, Slogans, Anecdotes* (Kampala, Uganda: MK Publishers, 2002)

and ears, and above all abduction of young children, some as young as seven years, forcing them to become LRA fighters. Many of these unfortunate children, turned into instruments of destruction and killing, have died in battle, and those who survive and return are in an unbelievable state. The girls are forced to become multiple “wives” to the fighters.

For a long time, the insurgency in the north was considered an Acholi affair, something they deserved for what the Acholi people in the UNLA did in the infamous Luwero Triangle massacres between 1981 and 1985. It's only recently that the current violence has drawn national and international concern. However, even with this awareness, there is still intimidation and there are accusations against the Acholi people.

You hear statements such as these: “Why are they killing themselves?” “We ended our violence in Lango, Teso, and West Nile, why not you Acholi?” The other ethnic groups blame the Acholi people for what is happening, while not recognizing the many Acholi children fighting the LRA on the side of the Uganda People's Defence Force. The Acholi population were the first to mobilize the “Arrow Boys” against the LRA in the early 1990s, but discarded this tactic due to its futility. The LRA, who are better equipped and more battle-hardened than the Arrow Boys and could move freely in the vast uninhabited Acholiland, responded more violently.

But there is also another dilemma facing the Acholi parent. Your child, and in some cases your children, were violently taken away from you. You were unable to protect and defend your child; not even the national and international institutions could do that. Now you are to pursue and kill him or her! What parent would ever do that? Even the father of Joseph Kony, the notorious LRA leader, once said Joseph was his favorite child.

An Acholi parent whose child is in captivity is always anxiously awaiting the child's return. Several have indeed managed to return alive, and thus has arisen the saying: “Even if the humanity in my child is taken away, at least he or she is alive.”

Most of these parents are dying with the guilt of having failed to protect their children from being taken. A mother of one of the girls abducted from a school was devastated when she was told that the LRA commander who was “keeping her daughter” and who had fathered two children with her was killed. She had been praying that this would not happen. Earlier she had sent a letter to

that commander, thanking him for at least protecting her daughter and keeping her alive. She wrote that she was looking forward to meeting that man, “her son-in-law,” and holding her grandchildren in her arms.

What Do We Do amidst Such a Dilemma?

“For God and My Country”—let's break the cycle of violence! The current situation in our beloved country is unacceptable. When one part of the body is in pain, the whole body suffers.

The new Archbishop of the Church of Uganda, the Most Reverend Luke Henry Orombi, pointed this out on the occasion of his enthronement. Individuals, families, and entire communities have been broken, our humanity taken away. Let's dream and work to overcome our brokenness and reconcile with one another, between and within communities and tribes. Let's build a culture of dialogue, nonviolent responses to conflicts, respect for the dignity of the human person, and social justice in order to regain our humanity.

Is this possible? Yes, everything is possible by the grace of God who has given us a rich cultural heritage, institutions, and shared land. It's possible if each man, woman, and child recognizes our interconnectedness and makes an effort to understand. Certainly, there are voices for such a process throughout our country.

But how do we begin, how and where? Let's do what we can and leave the rest to God Almighty. We are either victims or perpetrators and members of a community enmeshed in the cycle of violence, so as stakeholders we all must do our part and meet the needs of each category. What do victims need? How about the perpetrators and the community?

Certainly the perpetrators of violent crimes in our country need the following:

- Accountability that addresses the resulting harm, encourages empathy and responsibility, and transforms shame.
- Encouragement to experience personal transformation including healing for the harms that contributed to their offending behavior, opportunities for treatment for addictions to violence or similar issues, and enhancement of personal competencies.
- Encouragement and support for integration into the community.
- Of course, some may need to be restrained, but in a humanizing and transforming way.

My Piteous Eye

My piteous eye
Which flows tears
When it hears
A gun-shot
And sees blood
Betrays me
As a man,
any slight sound of
A gun
Any small drop of
Blood
Is lachrymal
It flows tears!
Fellow men tell
Me I'm a weakling
At heart
And a woman in mind
That to kill is only
Manly
That I shouldn't sit
Amongst men
Among women I'm odd
Bearded all over the face
Hairy all over the chest
So tell me
What should I do
When they fire
At the sit down group
And the peaceful demo
Should I laugh
When innocent blood
Flows; school children
Helpless citizens; the deprived!
The defenceless and the voiceless

—Frank Anywar Ojera, *Wars No More*, 2d ed. (Gulu, Uganda: Panywar Foundation, 1992), p. 61

We are either victims or perpetrators and members of a community enmeshed in the cycle of violence, so as stakeholders we all must do our part and meet the needs of each category.

Communities are impacted as secondary victims, and so have important roles to play including responsibilities to victims, to perpetrators, and to themselves. The victim communities of the war caused by the LRA need

- Attention to their concerns as victims.
- Opportunities to build a sense of community and accountability.
- Encouragement to take on their obligations for the welfare of their members, which include victims and perpetrators of violence, and to foster the conditions that promote healthy communities.

Individual victims of the violence we have experienced in our country need

- Information to answer the questions they have—questions such as “Why did it happen?” and “Why did it have to be me/us?” They need real information and not speculations.
- Truth-telling, an important element in healing, and the opportunity to tell the story of what happened. They do not want to be blamed or hear denials.

- Victims need to be empowered to see and live beyond their present situation.
- Restitution, not just because of the actual losses, but because of the symbolic recognition restitution implies of the more basic need of vindication.

I would like to conclude with Psalm 85:10: “Love (mercy) and truth will meet, justice and peace will kiss” (*The African Bible*, Paulines Publications Africa, 1999).

Mercy brings acceptance, grace, support, compassion, and healing. Truth on its part brings acknowledgment, honesty, revelation, and clarity, while justice would bring about equality, right relationship, and restitution (making things right). Peace is harmony, unity, well-being, human security, and respect.

These are the pillars on which will stand our nation’s reconciliation, peace, and prosperity.

Lam Oryem Cosmas is currently studying for an M.A. in conflict analysis and transformation with a Fulbright Scholarship at Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, Virginia, in preparation for returning to Uganda, his home country, to continue his work on peace and justice issues.

Continuous Insecurity in Northeast Uganda

by Romano Longole

Ugandan Church Leads Peace Efforts

Since Christianity arrived in Uganda in the late 19th century, the church has had a great deal of influence. Currently, in the areas living with high insecurity and massive displacement, it is the church, with its grassroots networks, that has taken a leadership role in advocating for the suffering people and for nonviolent responses to the conflicts. Following the example of the Acholi region and the formation of Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative, other areas are now forming inter-faith networks of religious leaders to speak “peace” into their respective situations. Considering the violent postindependence history of Uganda, this is a compelling sign of hope.

—Mary Lou Klassen

The two major causes of insecurity in northeast Uganda are the Karimojong cattle rustlers and the rebels of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), commonly referred to as the Kony rebels.

Cattle Rustling

Cattle rustling has gone on unchecked for over 30 years and is still continuing without any adequate measures to address the problem. The rustlers are mainly young warriors from ethnic Karimojong subclans who raid cattle from their own ethnic groups. Besides taking cattle the raiders are involved in looting, rape, indiscriminate killing, and abductions of innocent people.

The availability of modern rifles has complicated social relationships by eroding the traditional respect for elders by young people. In fact, the young warriors are now in control of the whole situation in Karamoja, as they use

their guns in all types of domestic issues and misunderstandings in their communities.

Insecurity has increased and food production has fallen drastically among the people of Acholi, Lango, Teso, and Sabinyi because fewer draft animals are now available to till the fertile land.

When President Yoweri Museveni came to power in 1986, his government and army were preoccupied with asserting control over the whole country and turned a blind eye to Karimojong raiders who attacked and stole cattle from their neighbors, and who were among those opposed to the Museveni takeover. By the time the new government controlled the whole country, the Karimojong had already acquired guns, making it almost impossible for the government to stop the raiding or to disarm them. When government recently removed over 40,000 guns from Karimojong warriors, the warriors acquired nearly double that amount of guns and the raiding increased drastically.

The LRA Rebels

In the nearly 40 years since her independence from British rule, Uganda has undergone long periods of insecurity and instability. Currently the rebellion of the LRA has thrown northern Uganda into confusion and uncertainty. The rebellion by the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) in southern Sudan has caused northeast Uganda to become a fertile place for suffering as well. Gun trafficking is an open activity along the common border of Uganda and Sudan and is responsible for sustaining continuous cattle rustling in the subregion.

The LRA rebels have inflicted a lot of suffering on the people neighboring Karamoja, mainly Acholi, Teso, and Lango. The people in the rebel-affected areas have been denied all the basic human needs by the rebels, as all are being housed in camps that are presumed to be protected by soldiers. The people in the camps are surviving at the mercy of relief agencies like the World Food Program and other international organizations that give humanitarian assistance to the displaced people.

The displacement of the entire population in the Acholi subregion has led to drastic food shortages for the rebels, which has made them resort to raiding cattle as well. The recent raid attempts by the rebels on cattle owned by the Karimojong people that had gone to graze in the Acholi district caused the Karimojong cattle owners to descend on them and inflict many casualties. The rebels responded by spraying bullets, leaving many animals dead.

The SPLA rebels have for many years bartered with the Karimojong people, along the Uganda-Sudan border, trading arms and ammunition for essentials like clothes and radios. This barter trade has been one of the main sources of guns for the Karimojong warriors. In the early 1990s, guns and ammunition were so plentiful that bullets were sometimes used in the trading centers to pay for local brews.

The Challenges of Peacemaking in Karamoja

The Kotido Peace Initiative (KOPEIN), based in the religious community, has been one of the main actors trying to help some of the Karimojong subclans in Kotido district to negotiate peace through dialogue. The process involves a cross section of people including elders, women, soothsayers, and some of the active raiders.

The peace dialogue was initiated at the end of 2000 between a section of the Karimojong Jie ethnic group in Kotido district and the people of east Acholi in Pader and Kitgum districts. By the beginning of 2001, the parties had reached some meaningful agreements and bylaws to govern both parties were put in place. The work of peace monitoring was assigned to KOPEIN and the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI).

Within one year a lot had been achieved by the two communities. Lending of ploughing oxen to the Acholi by some of their Karimojong friends was promoted and encouraged as a way of consolidating peace. The previous animosities between the people of the two communities was ending and life was moving back to normal in east Acholi, where the Karimojong warriors had inflicted a lot of damage and painful suffering during the dry season of 2000.

In the past the LRA rebels had sanctuaries in southern Sudan, from which they would sneak into northern Uganda to attack the civilian population, then return to their hide-outs. In March 2002, Operation Iron Fist was initiated by the Ugandan army to attack the LRA in southern Sudan. The rebels were displaced from their sanctuaries and had to flee into Uganda. By June 2002, the rebels had invaded many parts of Acholi, making peace monitoring in east Acholi impossible. The entire population of east Acholi was put into protected camps as the rebels killed, abducted, and tortured people outside the camps. Both Acholi people and some Karimojong who had settled with their Acholi friends were tortured and killed.

Some of the Karimojong rustlers who were not happy with the peace between the Acholi and the Jie took advantage of the bad situation and resumed the stealing of animals, as well as looting temporarily abandoned properties in Acholi homesteads. The Acholi people saw this resumption of stealing of Acholi property and animals by the Karimojong rustlers, at a time when the entire Acholi population was bleeding profusely, as the highest betrayal by a friend. It will be very difficult for the Acholi people to negotiate peace with their Karimojong neighbors in the future.

Looking Ahead

The subregions of Acholi and Karamoja in north and northeast Uganda are faced with a protracted conflict, with no short-term solutions in view. In the LRA rebellion, neither the military approach nor the peaceful

Kissing Judas

They paraded his body in the bed
of a pickup,
Sprawled,
Hands limp above his head
As though grabbed and hurled
aboard.
His hair stiff in short crusted spikes,
His stomach already burgeoning
with death—
Its angry bullet holes visible,
But dry.
We crowded around, staring,
Silent.
Here he was our enemy,
Brought to justice
And laid at our feet.

Behind him walked his killer—
Our proclaimed savior.
Shuffling forward,
The accolades coursed over
his down-turned features.
Wordlessly he accepted his due,
Then turned to go—
But the crowd broke
And a woman pushed forward,
Waving a banknote aloft.
She tucked it in his breast pocket
With a hug and whispered thanks.
Soon hundreds of coins and bills
Cluttered the ground,
Tinkling as rain,
Rejuvenating the man,
A slow smile blooming on his lips.

Amidst the jubilation,
I saw Judas walking anew,
Accepting thirty coins
To save his people from a madman.
It was his face I saw mirrored
in the shy soldier's—
Both killers in their own right,
Ultimate Love and ultimate hate
Perished in their hands
And we are left to bless and
to blame.
Into whose hand are you pressing
your coin?

—Esther Harder

The Amnesty Commission in Uganda—Whom Does It Serve?

[W]e have to ask a few questions about the intended goal of the Amnesty Commission in Uganda. Are its terms broad enough? In the Ugandan case it seems to be solely the business of the government and its opponents who might in the eyes of the masses be viewed as perpetrators of the abuse of human rights. What is the involvement of the civilian population, who very often bear the brunt of violence as victims of collateral damage? If government does not address their pain, do they need their own means of redressing their wounds?

Some sections of civil society have tended to see the resettlement of former fighters, without any consideration of the wounds inflicted on civilians, as rewarding abuse of rights. It becomes a kind of wheeling and dealing among the various political power seekers in the history of Uganda. The international and donor community has the moral obligation to ensure they do not fund such business in human suffering. Any group will tomorrow start up a rebellion, inflict untold pain on the civilians, and end up being forgiven and even paid for it, without a word of apology to those who suffered most.

... [T]he civilian population needs to be involved in some way in the act of “forgetting.” Second, ... the people most pained by past violence need to benefit from the commitment to repair a fractured human condition. If anything they should be at the center of the repair of their fractured lives and societies.

... [T]he Amnesty Commission in Uganda has much potential to bring closure to a violent past in Uganda. It is a necessary instrument but we need to look at its workings today. It seems to have become a tool of subjugation and allurement by the political powers without any consideration for the overall reconciliation and pacification of our community. ... Uganda has not even started the reconciliation process. Yet for this country, if there is any worthwhile investment, this is it.

—Father Pius Richard Okiria, peace worker in Uganda

approach has helped much to address the conflict. The peaceful approach cannot work due to deep mistrust between the government and the rebels. The military approach, which has been in use since the conflict started some 18 years ago, has not produced any positive results either; on the contrary it has sharply increased the intensity of suffering. The area where people are affected has also increased, as four more districts have been invaded by the rebels with large numbers of people living in camps.

The suffering of innocent people has eroded any chance for peaceful dialogue, and the rebels know that it will be impossible for them to be forgiven either by the state or by the masses of people whose relatives they have killed, tortured, raped, or abducted during the war.

The insecurity caused by the Karimojong rustlers has been mainly focused on looting property—cattle and garden produce—from the people already affected by rebel activity. This type of insecurity is currently being addressed by recruitment of local home guards such as the Arrow Group and Amuka in the Teso and Lango districts. This will greatly contribute to keeping the Karimojong rustlers away from raiding the cattle of the neighbors.

Peaceful negotiations between the Karimojong and their neighbors were already set in place by the religious leaders of Karamoja, Teso, and Acholi subregions. Rebel activity has greatly hampered this dialogue process.

Romano Longole is coordinator of Kotido Peace Initiative, based in Kotido, North-east Uganda.

Position Paper on Amnesty Law

1. Historical Background

The Amnesty Act, passed by the Parliament of Uganda on 9th December 1999, became Law on 20th January 2000. We could say that this Law was the result of the views and aspirations of the people of Uganda, particularly Acholi, after more than a decade of war that devastated their region. In their traditional culture, in a situation of violent conflict or crisis as it is the case today, the Acholi people lay great importance on finding ways of healing and restoring broken relationships to bring about forgiveness and reconciliation, as expressed in their “mato oput” way of peacemaking. Aware of this, we, as religious leaders, made our contribution to the development of this Law comparing it to the way God forgives as expressed in our religious traditions, both Christian and Muslim: “Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live?” (Ezekiel 18:23). “Oh my servants who have transgressed against their souls, despite not the mercy of Allah, for Allah forgives all sins for He is all forgiving and most merciful” (Shura Zumra 39:53). God’s unconditional forgiveness is once and for all and does not depend on the magnitude of the crime committed. This is a point where both Acholi cultural tradition and our religious scriptures meet and harmonise.

Ever since, the Amnesty Law has been extended every six months. We noticed that during the first year of its existence (2000) the Amnesty came under a lot of difficulties and criticisms, making it difficult to yield quick results since the means for its implementation (Amnesty Commission and Demobilisation and Resettlement Team) were not put in place immediately, and when they finally came into existence they came under a lot of financial constraints.

During the year 2001, despite many practical difficulties and lack of means, the Amnesty Commission made tremendous efforts to come to the ground, publicise their message and receive returnees. Offices with full-time staff were established in Gulu and Kitgum. The chairman of the Amnesty Commission, Justice Joseph Onega, travelled with a delegation to Khartoum, where they met with several former LRA members who had escaped from their former colleagues and were able to convince them to come back to Uganda. From our side, we, the religious and cultural leaders, joined hands with the Amnesty Commission and daringly went to the bush several times to talk to rebels about the Amnesty and convince them to lay down their arms and come back home for the good of our people.

In April 2001 Fr. Tarcisio Pazzaglia and cultural leader Rwot Joseph Oywak Ywakamoi held a series of meetings with some LRA junior officers near Pajule (now Pader district). One of these meetings, on the 21st April, was violently disrupted by the UPDF as they launched an attack on the venue. Despite this, a number of rebels came out of the bush.

In October 2001, the same Rwot Oywak, together with Rwot William Lugai and Fr. Carlos Rodríguez, went to the bush in Lapul (also Pader district) and brought ten rebels with their guns to Pajule Mission. The day before seven other rebels from the same group had reported to an LC in Atanga. The whole group was led by Major Philip Okelo . . . , so far the highest LRA ranking officer ever to take advantage of the Amnesty. We coordinated with the Amnesty Commission and the whole group was rehabilitated in Pajule Catholic Mission under the care of Caritas. A cleansing ceremony was organised by the cultural leaders (Rwodi) of Acholi. The Army, under the command of the late Maj. Ssegawa, took a friendly approach to the returnees and they frequently interacted with them in the Mission. After a period of two months, the Amnesty Commission officially handed them their certificates and a resettlement package. This period remained for us a good example of how co-operation and good will among all actors can make the Amnesty a key element in peacebuilding. Maj. Oneko Mon now serves with the UPDF, a product of the Amnesty.

In July 2001, the LC 5 chairman of Gulu district, Lt. Col. Walter Ochora, met with LRA commander Lt. Col. Onen Kamdulu in Awornyim, north of Gulu. Although in the end this rebel leader went back to Sudan, some of his fighters took advantage of the confidence that was built during that period and came out of the bush, taking full advantage of the Amnesty.

During the year 2002 the UPDF launched "Operation Iron Fist" and attacked the LRA bases in Sudan. In May that year we published a report entitled "Seventy Times Seven," where we analysed the impact of the Amnesty Law on the ground, reiterated our commitment to its implementation and expressed our opposition to this military operation, which in our opinion gave a confusing signal which was in contradiction with the spirit of the Amnesty.

Despite this, and with the Amnesty Commission gaining more skills and experience, more and more returnees took advantage of this law and were reintegrated into their communities. In July 2002, after being given the go-ahead by the President of Uganda,

the religious and cultural leaders started a series of peace meetings with the LRA with the purpose of preparing the ground for an eventual negotiation that would bring the long conflict to a peaceful end. These meetings revealed that the issue of the personal security of the members of LRA was one of their key concerns.

During the year 2003 these risky meetings continued intermittently, and a limited ceasefire was even declared by the President for a period of six weeks. Although the much-desired first face-to-face meeting between the Presidential Peace Team and the LRA never materialised, a good number of rebels whom we met in the bush during our peace contacts, including some junior officers, took interest in the Amnesty and we helped them come out of the bush.

We cannot fail to mention that a most important landmark in the road to peace in Northern Uganda was the signing of the peace agreement between the Government of Uganda and the rebel group UNRF II in Yumbe on 26th December 2003. There is no doubt that if the Law providing for an unconditional and blanket Amnesty had not been in place, this successful peace accord would not have been possible.

In August 2003 we started hearing the first reports of the intention to amend the Amnesty Law to exclude the rebel leaders. Despite repeated statements to this effect the Amnesty was extended in its present form on 17th January 2004, although this time only for a three-month period. Nevertheless, the Government of Uganda keeps talking about amending it in the near future.

2. Has the Amnesty Law been successful?

In our opinion, the Amnesty Law has scored very important successes in the struggle for peace. It provides a helpful institutional framework for healing and peace for Uganda as a whole. We are aware of the moral dilemmas involved in keeping in place an Amnesty for all rebels and for an indefinite period of time. It could be rightly argued that rebels can continue to commit atrocities with all impunity knowing that they will not be prosecuted for their crimes. Nevertheless, looking at the situation on the ground things could be much worse if the Amnesty had not been in place. Also, securitywise the Law does not tie the Government's hands in carrying out military operations. Amidst the challenges and dilemmas, the Amnesty Law has contributed to the following:

Sleeping in the Cold in Gulu Town

Archbishop John Baptist Odama may have never performed a more unusual ritual in his life.

For four consecutive days, in the evening, he quietly left his residence carrying a sack containing only a blanket, walked the five-kilometer distance to Gulu town, and on the way met a good number of children, carrying their own sacks and blankets on their way to the verandas for the night.

Odama greeted all of them warmly: "These are my colleagues, my fellow night commuters," he remarked with a smile, and continued on foot followed by the children—some as young as five—to the bus park.

Church of Uganda Bishop Nelson Onono-Onweng has had a similar experience, and also retired Kitgum Bishop Mcleord Baker Ochola II. Together with Father Julius Orach of the Orthodox Church and Sheikh Musa Khalil Khadi of the Acholi Muslim Community, they have worked together, united under the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative.

At one meeting, as they lamented the lack of concern of the international community over the deadly conflict in northern Uganda, they decided that enough was enough and spent a number of nights sleeping with the children, the most vulnerable victims of this war.

Some clergy and members of their congregations joined them, along with international NGO workers based in Gulu. The event eventually attracted a lot of interest from both national and international media, which highlighted the plight of the estimated 20,000 children who since June 2002 have been sleeping in the streets of Gulu town for fear of being abducted by the LRA.

—Father Carlos Rodríguez, a Comboni Missionary priest from Spain who has been active in peace and justice issues in Uganda for 16 years

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It has given a clear and consistent signal that the Government of Uganda, although pursuing military operations against the LRA, always leaves the door open for peaceful solutions to end the conflict.

According to updated official statistics . . . a total of 11,000 people have benefited from the Amnesty countrywide. Of these, almost 5,000 are those who have reported from the LRA. The situation of violence could be much worse if these persons had not found a way out thanks to the Amnesty Law.

Keeping in mind that the LRA, including many of its commanders, is made up of mostly abductees now transformed into perpetrators, and that these thousands of abductions have been a direct result of the failure of the state to protect innocent civilians, there is no doubt that the Amnesty Law has provided a way out for thousands of persons who have been trapped in this painful situation.

3. What would be the implications of amending the present Amnesty Law?

Rebels could commit even more atrocities out of fear, leading to a further escalation of violence in which abducted children always risk being caught in the crossfire.

Exclusion of the rebel leaders from the Amnesty will create more problems for the abducted children who are still in captivity under the influence of the LRA leadership.

Without an Amnesty for instigators of rebellion, it will be impossible for those of us still engaged in luring the LRA leadership into peace talks with the Government to do so. It will definitely close the door to the option of ending the conflict by negotiation, as has been the case in most conflicts worldwide—Liberia, Sierra Leone, Mozambique, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Central America, Northern Ireland, South Africa, Ivory Coast and Sudan. We notice that President Museveni has played a significant role in mediating in conflicts in Burundi and Somalia, where many atrocities have been committed by the parties involved in the conflict. We salute his efforts and note that what is good for those countries can also be good for our case in the North of Uganda. We can all benefit from his experience for a meaningful peace process in our still unresolved violent conflict.

Any criterion introduced for for the exclusion of certain individuals is likely to present complications and very tricky problems. For

example, if the Government does not mention names, there will be a damaging uncertainty as to who exactly is excluded. If the Government creates a list, this will have to continuously be updated to avoid becoming obsolete. Omissions from the list may create complaints.

Rebels who do not have a position of leadership and who were abducted some time back are likely to have mistrust and will fear coming home. This same mistrust may also affect ex-rebels who reported in the past and may now fear victimisation.

4. Our Proposal for the Future

A look at events in the past eighteen years of violent conflict in Northern Uganda reveals that a military solution has not brought a comprehensive victory for the government, and is unlikely to do soon. Viable alternatives must therefore be pursued.

In this respect, peaceful dialogue coupled with an unconditional and unrestricted Amnesty can save the lives of many innocent children, whereas the military option kills and leaves deep wounds in the hearts of many parents whose children have been cruelly forced into the rebellion against their own will. Let us all, as a nation, mind about these abducted innocent children who form over 90 per cent of the LRA in its present form.

We reiterate our commitment to continue pursuing a peaceful option to end the conflict by negotiation, a path which is difficult but not impossible. In order to achieve this we strongly advocate for the continuous extension of the Amnesty Law in its present form, without any restrictions or amendments.

The violent insurgency perpetuated by the LRA is no doubt complicated considering the nature and trend it has gone through. Several efforts have been tried, but have not yielded all the desired outcomes. Nonetheless, they have not been in vain since we have been able to save the lives of many young people who found themselves in this unfortunate situation. It takes as long to come out of a crisis as it took to get in, and if this is the case, to solve this long insurgency requires a long-term commitment for its transformation.

For God and our Country.
Sheikh Musa Khalil, Acting Chairman
Mgr. Matthew Odong, Secretary

This position paper was released February 12, 2004, by the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative.

Night Commuters and Soccer in Soroti

by Esther Harder

As a Minnesotan, I am used to impromptu Avacation days from school due to white-out conditions or extreme cold. During my student teaching experience in Virginia this past spring, I spent almost as much time out of class as I did teaching because of frequent snowfall and the resulting snow days.

Here in Soroti, Uganda, snow is not a problem. It is the least of my worries. Instead of dangerous weather, there are dangerous people; it's not snow that fills the air, but search helicopters. And the radio announcements aren't full of school closings; they broadcast the names of villages the rebels attacked and the number of dead or wounded.

A Tense Situation

The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), or Kony rebels, have been brutally massacring and kidnaping people in the northern Uganda districts for 17 years. It was only this June that they moved into Soroti district and began terrorizing the people here. Both the army and a militia group called the Arrow Boys are working to keep the rebels from pushing farther south.

LRA leader Joseph Kony is viewed as a madman by most because he has been attacking his own tribe all these years, and only since moving into Soroti has he been terrorizing another group of people. No one really understands his motives; they just shake their heads and promise me that it will all be over soon. But with Uganda pointing a finger at Kony's support in Sudan, and Sudan pointing back at Uganda's support of the Sudanese rebels, I don't see a peaceful solution near at hand.

Where do I fit in all of this? Well, some days I wonder. By title, I am a teacher of English and math at a girls' secondary boarding school. From my synopsis above, it may sound like I move about each day under fear of attack, but that is not the case (and for that I am grateful). I live right by an army base, one of the safer places in town.

The constant reminder that I am in a tense situation is what we call the night commuters. I have a twenty-minute bicycle ride to school morning and evening that corresponds with the travels of these commuters. A steady mass of people hikes to town each evening and leaves early in the morning. Women walk with mattresses, clothing, and

food on their heads, while their children straggle behind, often complaining of sore feet. The men have usually bicycled on ahead to "book" a place on one of the verandas in the center of town—their hotel room for the night—much like people put out their lawn chairs hours ahead of a parade at home.

These night commuters continue to walk each and every day; it is a sobering thought that by now I have grown accustomed to them and am not shocked by the hundreds that are entering town on just one of the many roads.

Often indistinguishable from the commuters are the IDPs—internally displaced people. They do not walk to and fro, but sit under trees or by a safe shelter in town, cooking with what firewood they could locate. Their homes have already been burnt by the rebels, or else they are too frightened to return, so their crops are rotting in the ground even as they starve in town.

As I pass on my way to school, I always get cries of greeting in Ateso, the language I am trying to learn. I work hard not to be annoyed with the stares and shouts of "Amusungut! Yoga!" (White person! Hello!) because I know that I am probably the only glimmer of excitement in their day. I greet them back and continue on, smiling outwardly and crying inwardly at their smiles of delight.

Bethany Girls' School is on the northern edge of town, nearer to the rebel activity. The teachers who stay on the compound at night talk of hearing gunshots. Parents call the head teacher frequently, demanding to know whether their girls are safe.

Fortunately our days pass quietly for the most part. The rumors and fear are more debilitating than reality. I am learning to pause in my lectures as the search helicopters whir overhead and the girls crane to see the direction they are headed; all of them are thinking, is it my village this time? I am also getting used to having five or six people sleeping in class because they spent the night running wild with fear from the burning huts on the horizon and the echoes of rifle fire.

Just recently one of my fellow teachers asked me what I would do if I were caught by the rebels: would I walk the 400 miles back to their camp and face inconceivable torture, or would I ask to be shot? For me they were

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only teasing, but the question has weight. How many times do these students and teachers ask that question each day?

Fitting In?

So, I am still left with the question of how I fit in Soroti. Can I be a counterbalance to the fear? And how do I teach around the disruptions springing from the need for safety? The fact that I have one math textbook for seventy students has paled as I face the larger issue of hoping for tomorrow.

Maintaining a positive attitude consumes a lot of energy, but people draw courage just from the fact that I am here with them in such an unstable time, and they actually go out of their way to make sure I am comfortable even when I feel I should be the comforter. Over and above that, I am trying to use soccer as an answer to fear. With a pencil sketch and a meter stick, the girls dug the lines of a football field into a grassy area beside their classrooms. In the evenings, they are able to play before supper.

As we bounce around the termite mounds, potholes, and saplings trying to score, it is much easier to feel like a normal human

being. The soldiers are still at the sidelines, and the helicopters still hover, but during the deafening jubilation after a goal, shoulders loosen from tension and smiles brighten the dusk. It is smiling and laughing that carries me through my insecurity.

In my Ateso language lessons, I am memorizing the Lord's Prayer. Having to focus on the words one phrase at a time in both English and Ateso has brought new meaning to "Give us today our daily bread. . . . Forgive those who sin against us. . . . Deliver us from evil." It is such a blessing to take refuge in the fact that God is with those starving in the camps, with the night commuters who never cease to walk, and with me, sitting down to three satisfying meals a day. Even harder to comprehend, he is there with the rebels in the bush, and it is his power that will eventually overcome this confusion.

To hear people proclaim forgiveness and love even in this reality gives me hope. May I learn to trust his timing and be patient through the disruptions.

Esther Harder is on a one-year assignment in Soroti District, Uganda, under the MCC Serving and Learning Together (SALT) Program.