

EDITORIAL

THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENTS IN ENDING AND PREVENTING ARMED CONFLICTS

Dr Sam Agatre Okuonzi, Executive Director, National Council for Children

The war in northern Uganda is ending, or is it? The official Government position is that the war is practically over. And they have evidence for it. Rebel soldiers are surrendering in droves, and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) leader Joseph Kony has retreated far into the Sudan with his army, having been scattered into small groups, which are constantly on the run.

Had history not taught us to be careful about such declarations, Ugandans would be celebrating the defeat of the LRA, given the unspeakable atrocities LRA has especially meted on children. But the declaration of a near-defeat or elimination of Kony and his LRA has been propagated by the Government for 18 years. And yet, somehow, the much-desired end of the LRA has always failed to materialize. Still, there is cause for optimism about the end of the war in the north, this time.

But the end of the LRA rebellion does not mean the end of wars in the north or in Uganda. The basic factors that start and propel wars in Africa are still intact in Uganda. They could still be re-ignited or could flare up again. The initial cause of the northern rebellion that subsequently coalesced around the LRA was a tribal revenge. It was to defy the National Resistance Army (NRA), who the north perceived as being dominated by Baganda and Banyankole (southerners), seeking revenge.

The Acholi say the NRA wrecked pillage in Acholiland (and generally in the north) in revenge for the atrocities carried out in the early 1980s by the Obote Government, which the NRA branded as a Government of northerners. The NRA rebellion took place in Luwero Triangle, which straddles a wide area in Buganda and other parts of southern Uganda. The beginning of the rebellion in the north was therefore not about a political comeback of northerners, although this would have been a bonus. It was about revenge and defiance. However, the war lost its original revenge-and-defiance causes, and begun to be fuelled by other factors.

One such factor was the wide and increasing disparity between the north and the south in socio-economic development (GOU, 2004). As far as they were concerned, it was irrelevant what, who or how this disparity was caused. Another factor was the perceived blatant exclusion of the north in the Government (except for cosmetic posts) and politics, and by extension, from the economy. A typical African country's economy is dominated by the political class, using the Government, through a predatory patronage system. These two factors are still prevalent Uganda. While the prospects for war may have diminished in Buganda and southwest because of a remarkable socio-economic

investment in those areas, people in other parts have much less to lose if they chose to start a war because there has not been that much development in those areas. Hence, inequity and perceived injustice still prevail, making people in the poor areas have propensity for war.

In this issue, we bring you the devastating impact of war on health in the north, and how communities and health systems in northern Uganda have been coping. We bring the views of Fr Rodriguez Carlos, who has been in the Acholiland for long, and has experienced the war first hand. We also include a summary of a paper circulated by the World Bank about the causes of war, particularly in Africa (see “Engine of War: Resources, Greed and the Predatory State” in the “Recent International Publications” in this issue).

The thesis at the World Bank on the genesis and propagation of conflicts has been that internal conflicts are due to the struggle to control natural resources – a struggle which ultimately leads to systematic human-rights violations. To reduce such conflicts, authors based at the World Bank have advanced the strategy of starving belligerents of such resources, which are usually portable and of high value (e.g. diamond, gold, timber or oil). However, careful examination of wars around Africa and the rest of the world makes this thesis fall on its face.

First, wars in El Salvador, Sri Lanka, Rwanda and Cote d’Ivoire were/are being fought for political and ethnical/religious grounds, not for control of resources *per se*. Second, wars have also been fueled by predatory autocratic governments supported by governments in the west. Examples include the wars in Angola, Colombia and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Third, third-party Governments seek to profit from resource-endowed neighbouring countries during periods of instability or conflict. In this category Uganda, Rwanda and Liberia have been quoted (Genessan A and Vines A, 2004). While it may be possible that Liberia’s involvement in the wars in Sierra Leone and Cote d’Ivoire was primarily driven by the greed to acquire resources in those countries, this generalization is misleading.

Uganda and Rwanda’s involvement in DRC was not primarily driven by greed for resources. The entry of the two countries’ armies into DRC was a response to the threat of invasion by rebels against these countries based in the DRC, which had no effective Government to stop them. However, in the process of pursuing the rebels, the armies could have been attracted by the resources in the DRC, which would then become a secondary factor in not going to war, but perhaps in perpetuating or intensifying the war.

Although this thesis has a lot of holes, its conclusion and recommendations concerning the role of Governments are profound. That is, while rebels who plunder resources and carry out systematic human rights violations should be held to account, Governments that are not democratic, transparent or accountable should also be held responsible for such human rights abuses. Management of resources has political dimensions and requires political solutions. Internal political solutions should be expeditiously sought to prevent wars and to manage conflicts. External political pressure, including targeted sanctions by

the UN, has been recommended to motivate opaque and corrupt governments to become more open and transparent.

References:

1. Carlos R 2004 “The Northern War: The ‘small conflict’ that has become the world’s worst humanitarian crisis” *Health Policy and Development* Vol 2 No 2 Uganda Martyrs University Press
2. Genessan A and Vines A 2004 “Engine of war: Resources, Greed, and the Predatory State” The World Bank, Washington DC, USA.
3. Government of Uganda 2004 “Poverty Eradication Action Plan: Draft” Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, Kampala.