

VIEWPOINT

THE NORTHERN UGANDA WAR: THE "SMALL CONFLICT" THAT BECAME THE WORLD'S WORST HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

Fr. Carlos Rodriguez, Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative

Acholiland was once known as the breadbasket of Uganda, but it is now the poorest part of the country. More than 900,000 people (over 80%) in the districts of Gulu, Kitgum and Pader are displaced, living in camps and dependent on food handouts. The war has dragged on for 18 years, but since 2002 there has been a dramatic escalation resulting in more displacement, more abductions and more killings.

The fact that this conflict has taken place in an area with no significant economic, commercial or geostrategic interests, together with the Government's insistence for years that this was a small internal conflict about to be finished, account for the fact that it has usually attracted little international attention and has not found its way into the international media. It is only after UN-under secretary Jan Egeland's visit in November 2003 that finally Northern Uganda started featuring in international agendas.

The origins of the conflict

In spite of a peace accord signed in Nairobi in December 1985 between (current President) Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army (NRA) rebels and Gen. Tito Okello's military regime, the former attacked and captured Kampala in January 1986, taking over the whole country soon thereafter. After a few months of calm, the remnants of the former Ugandan Army regrouped and launched a guerrilla war against the new Government. Ever since, a succession of rebel movements emerged in Acholi, and also in Teso. In 1988 the core insurgent group negotiated a peace deal with the Government and the population's initial support for the rebels greatly decreased. Later on, in the early nineties, the rebellion in Teso also ended thanks to some local initiatives.

Since 1990, the rebel movement increasingly came under the command of Joseph Kony, whose group came to be known as the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and started getting the full support of the Sudanese Government, as a tit-for-tat response to

Uganda's support for the SPLA. In this way the conflict became entangled in international military interests. A remarkable peace initiative led by the then Minister for the North, Betty Bigombe, which enjoyed much success and almost ended the war, collapsed when the President gave to the rebels a seven-day ultimatum to surrender in February 1994. Ever since, the conflict has continued unabated up to now, with the LRA launching periodical attacks in Acholiland and making the population live in terror.

The war on terror and operation iron fist

The recent US-led war on terror has changed the turn taken by the war. At the end of December 2001, at the request of the Ugandan Government, the US Secretary of State placed the LRA in the list of terrorist organisations. In March 2002, emboldened by this move, the Ugandan army Forces, Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF) launched the Operation Iron Fist (OIF), which was meant to rout out the LRA by taking the war into southern Sudan, the LRA's military and logistical base. This was done with the explicit support of the government of Sudan, which, fearing American retaliation after September 11, was anxious to be seen taking anti-terrorist measures.

OIF has been a catastrophe for the people of Northern Uganda. Kony evaded capture and most of the LRA poured into northern Uganda. Ever since, people in the north have suffered more atrocities than in previous years. Abductions, particularly of children, have skyrocketed. Displacement has more than tripled and the war has spread to Lango and Teso, northern and eastern sub-regions which for more than ten years had remained calm. The Government responded by creating some local militias. The Church has always cautioned that these could create new explosive situations. Up to now, and despite frequent official announcements by the Government that the insecurity is practically over, peace in northern Uganda still remains an elusive and distant dream.

A war against civilians

As it happens often with modern warfare, this is a war where the vast majority of its victims are innocent civilians, particularly the most vulnerable ones like women and children. Although the overall number of people killed during these 18 years may not go beyond 150,000, which makes the figures look modest in comparison with death tolls in other conflicts such as Sudan and Congo, dozens, or even hundreds of people have been massacred at a time by the LRA. The list is endless: Over two hundred in Atiak (April 1995), more than one hundred in Acholpii Sudanese Refugee Camp (July 1996), four hundred in Lamwo (January 1997), fifty in Mucwini (July 2002), ninety in Laponi (October 2002), three hundred in Barlonyo (February 2004) and recently (May 2004) eighty in Pagak and Lukode.

Many civilians have been brutally maimed or have lost their limbs as a result of stepping on landmines. Travelling through almost all roads is a great risk because of indiscriminate ambushes. This makes normal social and economic life extremely difficult.

Child abduction

Because of the population's lack of support, the LRA has always resorted to massive child abduction as practically the only means to beef up their forces. By 2002, UNICEF estimated that, since 1994, the LRA had abducted about 20,000 persons, mostly children, and forced them to undergo military training in their bases in Sudan. Many of these young unwilling soldiers have also been used to fight the SPLA. Disappointingly, while one of the justifications for the launching of Operation Iron Fist was "*to rescue the abducted children*", it has instead resulted in an unprecedented increase in child-abductions. It is estimated that, since mid-2002 up to the end of 2003, the number of abductions was well over 10,000.

Since the year 2002, a new phenomenon known as "*child night-commuters*" has become an outstanding feature of this conflict. It is estimated that more than 40,000 children trek from their homes every evening into the relative safety of the main towns like Gulu and Kitgum.

By some reliable estimates, at least 80% of the LRA forces are made up of young people who did not choose to join the rebel ranks. Moreover, there is now a whole generation of very young children who have been born in the LRA captivity and have known no other home

than the rebel gangs. Many who try to escape are caught and killed on the spot by their own fellow-abductees, who are compelled to carry out these atrocities. Deeply traumatised, those who come back home after escaping face a hard life of reintegration since their former communities are destroyed. Many find that their parents have been killed and opportunities to continue with their studies are scarce. The situation is even worse for girls and young women who come back from rebel captivity, most pregnant or with children of their former captors.

A high number of these abducted children end up being killed in armed confrontation with the UPDF, particularly when helicopter gunships are used. This explains why regularly the Army announces that only few hundred rebels remain, only to say five or six months later that they have killed twice or thrice that previous figure. At times some of these returnees are also pressurised to join the UPDF.

Massive displacement

In 1996 the Army started forcing thousands of civilians out of their villages in Gulu district into the so-called "*protected villages*". Often they used a scorched-earth policy, including bombardments of rural areas to make the people accept this encampment. Few months later, in January 1997, a five-day massacre in Lamwo county, in Kitgum, which left more than 400 killed by the LRA, forced thousands into displacement. By the beginning of 2002 there were 400,000 internally displaced persons in Acholiland, mainly in Gulu and Kitgum districts.

In September 2002, the Army issued a 48-hour ultimatum to the civilian population to leave their homes or be considered as rebels. The whole of Pader district, which up to that time had almost no displaced camps and where people used to stay in their villages, became 100% displaced. People in few remaining villages in Kitgum, where people had resisted leaving their homes all these years, were forced out by the Army during the last months of 2003 and beginning of 2004.

Moreover, the spread of the war to Lango and Teso has also created huge patterns of displacement there. By the beginning of 2004 the World Food Programme estimated that the total number of displaced stood at 1.6 million people. Food distribution usually takes place every two months. Given the high insecurity on the roads, for some camps, particularly in the Eastern part of Pader district, it may take up to four months to

receive food aid. Some camps are not recognised officially and do not get any relief. Unless it receives new donations, the WFP stores will run dry by the end of June 2004. Many villagers, particularly women, who venture to their villages to look for food, have been killed either by rebels or Government troops.

Started with a justification of providing security for the civil population and depriving the rebels of food and recruits, practically all of these camps have become real death traps, as they have been constantly attacked by the LRA, which often leaves scores of people killed, hundreds of huts burnt down and more abductees taken.

People who once used to live a self-reliant existence on farming are now idle most of the time. This unnatural way of living under appalling conditions is rapidly destroying traditional cultural and moral values. The incidence of HIV/AIDS in these camps is shocking. Areas in Kitgum where the HIV rates never went beyond 5% have gone up to 30% after people were put in camps.

Initiatives for peace

In 2000, soon after signing a peace agreement with the Sudan Government, brokered by the Carter Center, the Ugandan Government passed an Amnesty Law, which has enabled an estimated 5,000 persons to return home from the LRA. The Church has always supported this Law and has encouraged rebels to come back and benefit from it. However, attempts are now being made by some government officials to amend this Law in order to exclude the main LRA leadership.

Also, in August 2002 the Government appointed a Presidential Peace Team, which was active during March and May 2003, but later on left Gulu because of a number of reasons.

Since 2002 up to mid-2003, the inter-denominational group Acholi Religious Leaders' Peace Initiative (ARLPI), under the leadership of the archbishop of Gulu John Baptist Odama, together with some cultural leaders, has held twenty meetings with top LRA commanders in an effort to bring the rebels and the Government to the negotiating table and end the conflict peacefully. Many of these meetings have taken place amidst great risks and misunderstandings. The Rome-based Community of Sant'Egidio, has been discreetly but effectively supporting these efforts.

In mid-April this year, President Museveni made a

public announcement saying that he was ready to talk to the rebel leaders in order to end the war. Nevertheless, both sides are still on full offensive and they have no trust in each other, making prospects for this solution still look dim.

The recent peace agreement signed between the Sudan Government and the SPLA is, no doubt, a positive factor that may benefit the cause of peace in northern Uganda. However, experience has taught us to avoid being over-optimistic and remember that peace will not come automatically.

Prospects for the future

Has anything changed in Northern Uganda during the last few months? At the moment of writing this article, in June 2004, the Uganda Government and a number of observers say that the LRA is getting militarily weaker.

A number of reasons are advanced to support this view: the rebels no longer have a permanent base in Sudan, where Kony seems to be always on the move and without any significant military assistance from his old Sudanese friends. It is also said that many rebels have been killed and that there is a constant trickle of rebels, including some junior officers, who keep surrendering. It is argued that the recent peace accord between the Government of Khartoum and the SPLA is likely to have a huge psychological impact that may push the LRA for a negotiated settlement or just make them melt away.

Judging things from the ground, experience has taught us that in the Northern Uganda war things need to be taken cautiously, avoiding being over-optimistic. During the 18-year old war there have been some other similar moments. The much-repeated statements that "the war is almost over" or that "the situation is generally calm" are not new to our ears. There are moments in which we are told that the violence is scaling down, only to be taken by surprise by another massacre, as it happened in Odek on April 29, in Pagak on May 16 and in Lukode on May 20. The situation continues to be very serious, and so far the supposed wearing out of the LRA is not having much effect in having any significant impact in changing in the lives of the at least 1.6 million displaced persons staying in the camps living in constant fear. Abductions, although generally unreported in the Press these days, continue almost on a daily basis. A good number of abductees end up being killed in armed clashes and are reported as "rebels killed".

Conclusion

Is an outright victory by the UPDF possible? Supporters of this view often refer to the defeat of the ADF in Western Uganda as an example. Whether this is possible or not, ARLPI's view has always been that peace achieved by military means on the long run is not as sustainable as peace achieved by dialogue. The thousands of parents whose children were abducted and who have lost them during armed clashes may remain with a bitterness that will not go away easily.

Moreover, even with the scenario of a weakened LRA without support from Sudan, the chronic insecurity might not stop at once. The LRA violence may continue even without any military assistance from Sudan.

In order to get a comprehensive solution that will last we need to keep working on a peaceful settlement that will end with a general demobilisation of the LRA.

This is the main challenge ahead of us.