

Peace and conflict in northern Uganda 2002-06

Chris Dolan

In the period 2002 to 2006 the situation in northern Uganda made a definitive transition from being a 'forgotten conflict' to being highly visible and a centre of attention for the international community. Wider international agendas on terrorism, humanitarianism and justice influenced the strategic choices of the conflict parties – the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Government of Uganda (GoU) – in an era that saw escalating violence and displacement.

In the wake of the recently established 'global war on terrorism', international actors sanctioned a renewed push towards a military solution. In January 2002 Uganda and Sudan held talks, facilitated by the UK, which authorized Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) incursions into southern Sudan. The stated aims of the incursions were to rescue abducted children and to capture or kill Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) leader Joseph Kony and his key commanders.

The Sudanese government was widely believed to have been supporting the LRA but now needed to position itself extremely carefully in the light of the war on terrorism. In March 2002 Uganda passed the Anti-Terrorism Act making membership of the LRA a criminal offence, a year after the US State Department had posted the LRA on its 'B-list' of 'other terrorist organizations'. This was a blow to ongoing grassroots peace efforts, exposing civilians attempting to promote dialogue to charges of treason, and also raising the stakes for any government considering offering them support.

Following US-sponsored 'routine training' of 6,000 UPDF soldiers, Operation 'Iron Fist' – the UPDF's military offensive against the LRA – officially began in March 2002. Although originally intended to expire within a matter of weeks, it was extended on numerous occasions.

The costs of the offensive were high and more soldiers were recruited as the UPDF came under increasing pressure. Community leaders in northern Ugandan districts Gulu and Kitgum were ordered to recruit at least five men each from their respective wards, and the formation of ethnic militias in all the conflict affected regions resulted in an additional 30,000 men being put under arms, though with only the briefest training. Troops were redeployed from other areas of Uganda and the government would later blame the failure to disarm fighters in the north-east sub-region Karamoja on the redeployment of UPDF troops to the north.

The strategy had other costs, evident for example in the government's decision to cut social services budgets by

25 per cent in October 2002 in order to fund the building of roads for the military in northern Uganda.

The consequences of escalating militarization in terms of humanitarian crisis were dramatic. The number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) rose from around 400,000 before Iron Fist, to over 1.5 million – at one point the third largest internal displacement situation in the world. The operation's impact, however, was in key respects the opposite of its stated goals: rather than rescuing abducted children and eliminating the LRA threat, it prompted an increase in both. The LRA spread its operations far deeper into the Lango and Teso northern sub-regions than before. Human Rights Watch estimated 5,000 new abductions in the period June 2002 to March 2003 alone. The phenomenon of children commuting into towns for better security on a nightly basis re-emerged on a massive scale.

Fresh incentives emerged to sustain the conflict. For example key members of the UPDF were eventually found to be logging high-value timbers from their areas of operation in southern Sudan. One area where the military offensive did appear to achieve its objectives was in enabling an increase in the numbers of LRA rebels reporting to the Amnesty Commission. LRA 'reporters' to the Commission jumped from 1,086 in 2002, to 3,601 in 2004, before declining again to a mere 90 in 2007.

In parallel to escalating its military activities against the LRA, the Government of Uganda was deeply involved in peace talks in the West Nile region with the second Uganda National Rescue Front (UNRF II, a breakaway faction of the West Nile Bank Front rebel group that included UNRF members refusing peace with Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni). These talks sought to end more than two decades of conflict between the government and the UNRF that had begun in 1979 following the ousting of Idi Amin Dada. The government-UNRF II ceasefire that occurred in June 2002 was presented by the Ugandan Government as a by-product of Operation Iron Fist. The demobilization that resulted was minor, however, compared to government recruitment patterns elsewhere.

The creation from mid-2003 onwards of ethnic militias to repel the LRA resulted in more than 30,000 men taking up arms in the Lango, Teso and Kitgum regions in less than a year. The first militia in Teso (*Amuka*) was pulled together by Musa Eweru, the Resident District Commissioner of Kisoro district, who abandoned his posting in order to rally his ethnic kinsmen. But both this militia and the ones subsequently established in the Lango sub-region (Rhino Boys) and Kitgum district (Frontier Guards) were rapidly brought under government control.

*Dr Chris Dolan lived in northern Uganda in the late 1990s while working for the NGO ACORD. He completed his doctorate from the London School of Economics in 2005. His book, *Social Torture; the Case of Northern Uganda, 1986-2006*, was published in April 2009 (Berghahn Books). Since July 2006 he has been Director of the Refugee Law Project, Makerere University, Kampala.*

Ethnic tensions were aggravated in Lira and Gulu districts in early 2004 after the massacre of approximately 200 people at Barlonyo IDP camp in Lango sub-region prompted retaliatory attacks by Langi against Acholi, believing as many did that the massacre had been perpetrated by the 'Acholi' LRA.

Intermittent peace efforts

Sporadic government led or sanctioned peace efforts during this period failed to make a breakthrough. In November 2002 the LRA ignored a call from the newly established Presidential Peace Team (PPT) for it to assemble in designated 'safe-zones'.

Subsequent attempts by an expanded peace team led by Museveni's half-brother Salim Saleh to enter into dialogue with the LRA in March 2003 were also unsuccessful. Turning down Museveni's appeal to assemble in safe-zones, the LRA demanded that a ceasefire be extended throughout the whole region. Following the withdrawal of the government's limited ceasefire offer in April 2003 and the dismissal of PPT Chair Eriya Kategaya, another new peace team (*Uduru Kuc*) was established, but again to little effect.

On 15 November 2004 the government declared a seven-day ceasefire to enable Betty Bigombe, a former minister, to pursue talks with support from the US, the UK and the Netherlands. This was extended for a longer period but hostilities soon resumed when the LRA attacked Alero, Gulu district, on 1 January 2005.

Proliferation of international initiatives

UN involvement increased exponentially following the visit of the Secretary-General's Special Representative on Humanitarian Affairs, Jan Egeland, in November 2003 [see *Egeland interview, p. 19*]. His assertion that northern Uganda was one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world drew attention from the Security Council, which condemned LRA atrocities. It also prompted a significant increase in external intervention from early 2004.

This increase in international awareness went hand in hand with a number of wider developments in the humanitarian and international justice fields. Uganda became something of a test case for new international agendas and strategies.

IDPs became a higher priority around this time: the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) expanded its mandate to incorporate IDPs and the UN worked closely with the Ugandan government to develop the world's first national IDP policy (2004) based on UN principles. Northern Uganda was also used as one of the pilots for the controversial humanitarian 'cluster' approach under which UN agencies assume responsibility for coordinating particular aspects of a humanitarian situation.

In the domain of international criminal justice, the world's attention was again drawn to northern Uganda when Museveni referred the situation to the newly established International Criminal Court (ICC) in 2003 [see *Afako article, p. 21*]. With all eyes on the ICC to see whether or not it could deliver on its promise of reducing impunity for war crimes and crimes against humanity, arrest warrants were issued for five LRA leaders in July 2005 and unsealed in October the same year.

Of those wanted, Joseph Kony and Okot Odhiambo are believed to be alive now. Raska Lukwiya was reportedly killed in 2006, while Vincent Otti was reportedly executed by the LRA while in Garamba National Park in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (where the LRA gathered during the Juba talks) in October 2007. Dominic Ongwen was rumoured to have been killed in 2005 but this has not been verified.

The ICC's involvement was not welcomed by all. Civil society actors pointed out that the referral was at odds with the provisions of Uganda's Amnesty Act, which LRA fighters had begun to take up in significant numbers. Their scepticism received an angry response from proponents of international justice, but subsequently prompted a more in-depth discussion both within Uganda and internationally about the role of traditional justice and mechanisms such as truth-telling processes and reparations.

The national and regional context also shifted substantially in this period. A national referendum held in Uganda in July 2005 led to the re-introduction of multi-party politics for the first time since 1986. National elections were held in February 2006, although Museveni's National Resistance Movement (NRM) received virtually no support in the conflict-affected northern regions.

Two major and volatile conflict situations in the region improved with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in Sudan in January 2005 and the holding of elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in 2006. Developments in Sudan in particular impacted on the LRA situation. The CPA meant Khartoum had less reason or opportunity to provide support for the LRA, while the newly-established Government of Southern Sudan became less willing to continue hosting the UPDF.

This combination of international attention and national and regional political shifts inevitably influenced the Ugandan government's strategic options. It was under pressure to demonstrate its commitment to furthering regional peacemaking and to protecting its own citizens, while new economic opportunities created by a more stable southern Sudan added additional incentives to end the conflict. These were the conditions surrounding the peace negotiations between the Ugandan government and the LRA that began in Juba in July 2006.

The cessation of hostilities that followed in September was a blessing to the LRA-affected populations of northern Uganda. Operation Iron Fist and the LRA's response had resulted in ever higher levels of militarization at a national level and had pushed the humanitarian crisis to its peak. But the ceasefire enabled the UPDF to redeploy back to Karamoja and revive its brutal, military-led disarmament process, which required a new humanitarian response. This neatly reflects how national and international treatment of the Ugandan situation has lacked political analysis of the broader pattern of conflict in Uganda and across its borders, and has failed to appreciate sufficiently the need for locally-driven solutions, coupled with a national perspective on durable peace in the country as a whole.