

Interview: Hizkias Assefa

Civil society engagement: the role of Pax Christi in the Juba process

This is a brief account of how international non-governmental Catholic peace movement Pax Christi facilitated dialogue between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Government of Uganda (GoU) as part of the Juba negotiation process. It is drawn from an interview with Hizkias Assefa who worked with Pax Christi at the time. Due to ongoing peacemaking efforts in the region and resultant sensitivities, the account remains an overview.



Pax Christi's involvement with the LRA situation dates back to 1998 and my personal involvement began in 1994. The Juba negotiations to end the LRA conflict started because of contact and trust established with the two protagonists – the LRA and the GoU – during this time. These relationships were the basis for the first negotiation contacts with LRA leader Joseph Kony and his deputy Vincent Otti in early 2006, and later that year between the LRA senior leadership and the GoU, which led to the start of the Juba talks.

Joseph Kony had written to Pax Christi asking for our mediation. The venue was significant for the LRA because of International Criminal Court (ICC) arrest warrants for certain LRA members. As Sudan was not a signatory of the Rome Statute, LRA members could enter Southern Sudan without being arrested. We therefore approached the Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS) requesting they host a meeting in order for us to facilitate a very low-key, problem-solving type of negotiation process. However, various factors prevented us from following through on the design of the talks as initially intended.

Despite the difficult conditions of the talks, an important Cessation of Hostilities Agreement was reached at the end of August 2006 that effectively brought the fighting in northern Uganda to an end. By late Autumn, the negotiations became seriously stalemated and both delegations were frustrated that the talks were foundering. There was immense suspicion

and animosity between the delegates, which they were not helped to overcome. The parties were not even able to have informal facilitated encounters to work through some of the blockages despite the fact that both delegations requested such help. The confidence of both sides, particularly the LRA, in the Juba talks dissipated significantly at this time and they were calling for a change of venue.

So a 'back channel' approach was envisioned to try to jump-start the stalled negotiations. In early 2007 informal talks were organized by Pax Christi in Mombasa, Kenya, intended to respond to blockages in the Juba process, caused in part by the 'goldfish-bowl' atmosphere of Juba. The idea was to transfer the results of any progress made in Mombasa back to the formal mediation process in Juba. The Mombasa talks were held with the approval of the top principal of each conflict party. Prior to going ahead, we were assured that the other Juba mediation panel members would be informed of the back channel process. In the true sense of negotiation, the Mombasa talks provided the opportunity for more genuine and open interaction between the parties than was happening in Juba.

There are many reasons for the failure of the Juba talks as well as for other peacemaking efforts that preceded them. Negotiations in Mombasa cleared blockages to direct communication between the senior figures from both parties. However, the opportunity to build on those accomplishments was largely lost when the talks resumed in Juba.

Hizkias Assefa is an international peacebuilding practitioner and professor of Conflict Studies at the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding at Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Working with Pax Christi, he played a mediating role in the lead up to and early part of the Juba talks. More recently he has been involved in mediation work in Senegal and Nigeria, and was a mediation expert for the African Union sponsored talks led by Kofi Annan to end post-election violence in Kenya.