Interview: His Highness Rwot David Onen Acana II.

Acholi civil society engagement in Juba

The talks’ set-up

What is your impression of mediation at Juba?

The talks brought on board different actors, both international and local, which provided legitimacy to the process. The mediation team involved people of high calibre and respect. But the team’s weakness was that it continued with ‘business as usual’ without stopping to re-evaluate progress, challenges and why certain things were not going right. Especially when the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) leader Joseph Kony stopped engaging with the mediation directly. As time went on the role of the Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS) as mediator became tricky, as it was not seen as neutral.

What are your thoughts on the LRA/Movement and Ugandan government delegations?

The government team was composed of capable individuals but the challenge they faced was that they seemed not to get the full support of the political leadership in Kampala. Whereas the LRA delegation also had some capable individuals, there was competition that brought infighting amongst them and at times with other stakeholders.

How would you characterize the role of international community?

The international community supported the process both financially and politically. The challenge here was that they were not all agreed as to the best way to conclude the process. Specifically the US favoured a military solution and was initially not keen to support dialogue.

Were you convinced that the LRA wanted a peace deal? What made them change their mind?

The LRA wanted peace, except that they were yet to come to terms with the reality of the situation. Kony said that he did not want to be tried by the International Criminal Court (ICC) and that unless warrants were removed he would not sign. The level of mistrust was very high and the process did not manage to allay those fears. The subsequent government military offensive (Operation Lightening Thunder) only helped to widen this gap.

The issues

Were the right issues addressed in Juba?

The issues discussed in Juba were broadly right, except that they failed to tackle the specific interests of the LRA leadership. These were assumed to be catered for generally in the agreements. Yet the LRA leadership never felt that way. More critical engagement of the LRA was needed rather than relying on proxies (I.e. the LRA delegation).

What is your view on justice as a tool for peace and how do victims see the traditional approach?

Our position is that traditional justice is not a substitute for formal justice, but rather it is complementary and contributes to the whole justice framework. These should not be competing but complementing each other.

Civil society’s role

What was your role as a civil society leader in the build-up to and during the talks?

My role initially involved meeting key individuals and policymakers on the need to keep the option for dialogue open as the most feasible and sustainable way of bringing peace. I met HE Dr John Garang, then leader of the SPLM/A, at Simba Lodge Hell’s Gate national park in Naivasha on 17 September 2003 and requested his help to establish a communication link with the LRA high command and also for them to consider the issue of northern Uganda, should relative peace be achieved in southern Sudan. I played a bridge-building role between the LRA and Government of Uganda to engage in peace talks. I also provided advice to both parties’ delegations, updated the community and the public and appealed to them to support peace process.

Rwot David Acana II was invested in the newly-created position of Acholi Paramount Chief in January 2005 in Gulu. In this position, he heads Ker Kwaro Acholi, a focal point of conflict resolution at the family, clan, interclan, inter-ethnic levels and responsible for traditional conflict management mechanisms. Mr Acana, with other civil society leaders, has condemned the military approach in northern Uganda and urged donors to continue their support for a negotiated solution.
What do civil society leaders such as yourself bring to peace negotiations?
We bring analytical appreciation of the challenges of peacemaking. We can play the role of trusted emissaries and bridge-builders for both parties. We call for tolerance and patience and our presence provides legitimacy and carries the voices of the community. Even if not elected, civil society figures wield formidable legitimacy in the eyes of the communities they represent since they are most often impartial in their work and so have the communities’ trust.

What effect did the presence of civil society leaders at Juba and Ri-Kwangba have on the formal mediation process?
The presence of civil society leaders gave the process credibility and brought community voices to the peace process. Despite challenges during two years of negotiations, they kept the process alive and the parties talking. Even in instances when the LRA withdrew, civil society always worked hard to get the parties back to the negotiation table.

But the perception that too many actors were trying to establish communication and sending conflicting messages is true. Sometimes this was very disruptive for the peace process since these groups at times had different interests which would slow down the pace of negotiations before things could be put right. In some cases there is a trade off in peace negotiations between inclusiveness and efficiency. While you want all shades of opinion represented in peace processes, it might be challenging given the complexities of balancing various groups’ interests. It is important to have creative approaches to inclusiveness.

What was your greatest achievement and biggest failure at the talks?
Our greatest achievement was that the conflict stopped in northern Uganda and our people began returning home – although the problem was exported to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Southern Sudan. Our biggest failure was not stopping the continuation of the war after the failure to sign the peace agreement in November 2008.

Beyond Juba
What effect have the Juba talks had on the LRA conflict and peace dynamics?
Even though a peace deal was not signed, the process showed that peace talks are possible with the LRA, and that civil society are important interlocutors for peace.

What actions would you like to see to bridge the current impasse?
It is important that civil society, the LRA and the Ugandan government are brought together so that they can all agree on the direction that the peace process should take before commencing any concrete steps. The concerns of the LRA senior leadership need to be addressed particularly.

What role should civil society play from now?
Civil society organizations should explore ways of ensuring that dialogue remains on the minds of the parties and assist them to re-visit some of the contentious issues, so that the agreements are acceptable to both parties and subsequently signed. In the meantime it is important to engage Uganda’s political leadership to prioritize the implementation of Agenda 1 and 2 by demonstrating the gains this will have for the future stability of the region.

Are negotiations the right way to end the conflict?
Negotiations are the right way to end the conflict because they can tackle the underlying problems that cause the conflict to continue, which will bring a final end to it.