

Interview: Jan Egeland

The United Nations and Juba

What did you achieve at the Juba talks?

One achievement of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) at Juba was to bring northern Uganda to the international arena, from being a forgotten and neglected conflict to one that got attention and resources and even a peace effort. Secondly, we were able to help facilitate and sustain a cessation of hostilities.

I see it as a real achievement. Many people are not able to look at trends; they look at the difficulties of today and then decide that everything was badly done. I was there in 2003 when people were massacred every day and the number of displaced was two million and growing. In northern Uganda today you see communities being rebuilt, people returning. And there have been comparatively few killings in northern Uganda since 2006.

I wish the talks had been more effective in bringing a final end to LRA military activities and in reintegrating them, and that the breakdown of the talks could have been avoided, which has created havoc in vulnerable communities in eastern Congo and Southern Sudan. That is horrific. But all in all, the situation is indisputably better today than it was before the peace efforts started.

How should we assess the success of a peace process like Juba that does not deliver a final settlement?

I have been involved in more than a dozen peace processes. If we look at situations like Colombia, efforts have been



Jan Egeland, former UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, speaks on the progress towards ending the conflict in northern Uganda and in the Democratic Republic of Congo, at UN Headquarters, New York, September 2006

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ultimately unsuccessful and you end up with a situation as bad or worse as it was before. So to end up with a sustained cessation of hostilities and then with a situation where millions of people's lives are permanently improved like in northern Uganda is not a bad result. In real life the alternatives are not between perfect war and perfect peace. They are between imperfect war and imperfect peace.

In November 2006 you met with LRA leader Joseph Kony. What did you discuss with him?

My mandate was to try to prevent suffering. When I met Kony I was very clear first that I would not discuss the International Criminal Court (ICC), and second that a return to terror would be horrible, not only for the civilian people, but also for the LRA themselves. I tried to make the alternative to continued war and terror as attractive as possible.

What do you think needs to happen to advance peace now?

Twenty years of LRA terror should have taught us that there is no pure military solution. That was tried repeatedly in the years before the Juba peace effort.

The peace effort needs to be a parallel process incorporating three strands. First, protecting civilians through security arrangements. Second, trying to capture those who execute terror. And third, trying to renew efforts for a durable settlement, which means reaching out to those in the LRA that you want to reintegrate. Those who should go to jail should go to jail.

Are there lessons that you have learned from Juba that can inform other processes?

A weakness in the process in northern Uganda was the inability in 2005-06 of the political department of the UN and those who know peace mediation on a professional basis to deploy forcefully to the region to advance the diplomatic efforts. There were no resources from their side. That is why by default my own organization UNOCHA was asked to go in. UNOCHA is not supposed to deal with peace processes, but rather to coordinate humanitarian responses. But nobody else was able to organize meaningful international support to the

Mr Jan Egeland is Executive Director of the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs and Associate Professor at the University of Stavanger. Mr Egeland was the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator from June 2003 to December 2006. He has substantial experience in the field of humanitarian relief and conflict resolution through the United Nations, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent, the Norwegian Government and NGOs.

Southern Sudanese peace effort, so we did it. Otherwise the whole thing would have fallen apart very early.

The UN has to be more proactive on the political front. There needs to be more proactive help for security arrangements, as well as political settlements and responses. That was too weak in northern Uganda, as it was early on in Darfur and in many other conflicts where humanitarian action has been the main response.

In northern Uganda the UN Department of Political Affairs (UNDPA) encouraged UNOCHA to lead because their one desk officer did not have time to do it. UNOCHA has a standby arrangement; it is operational. UNDPA did not have that at that time. The new mediation support unit and the standby team for mediation support in UNDPA was a response to the very visible impediment to UNDPA engagement in northern Uganda and in Darfur.

Darfur was in 2003-04 a small conflict that was clearly getting more serious. Early on the only thing we really did was to respond with more humanitarian relief. We should have been proactive in mobilizing diplomatic and political resources of the UN and its member states to put maximum pressure on the government and on the rebel forces to reach a negotiated solution to the conflict.

In Uganda it was exactly the same. It is mind-boggling that the UN, its member states and the whole donor community could be sitting in Kampala for 18 years and not look over their shoulders to see that massacres of the worst kind were taking place. Proactiveness means doing something: in this case, finding political and security solutions, especially when the government so clearly shows that it is not able to put an end to it.

What are the implications of the UN ending the mandate of the Special Envoy to the LRA-affected areas?

If I was [Joaquim Alberto] Chissano I would feel very disappointed and offended by the LRA and their so-called representatives. But I do not think this means that there is no future for a political track in northern Uganda. I discussed with Kony and his then second-in-command, Vincent Otti, the cessation of hostilities. It should be possible still to meet with the remaining LRA rank and file and convince them that they will die out there if they do not reintegrate. If we only come after them with force, however, they can displace tens of thousands in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Southern Sudan and to Central African Republic. It is very difficult to contain them in that area.