

Introduction

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Since 1986, violent conflict has gripped the sub-region of northern Uganda, referred to locally as Acholi or Acholiland. The war has resulted in countless deaths, the abduction of almost 10,000 children, widespread human rights violations, the destruction of social and economic infrastructure, and displacement of over half the population – many of whom live in life-threatening conditions in 'protected villages'.

While most Ugandans south of the Nile have enjoyed greater levels of security and prosperity as a result of relative peace since the National Resistance Movement / Army (NRM/A) came to power in 1986, the war in Acholiland defies this trend. To bring peace and development to Acholiland it will be necessary to understand why the war has been so persistent and why efforts to end it through both peaceful and military means have not yet been successful. Drawing on authors with first-hand knowledge, this edition of *Accord*, which largely reflects an Acholi-centred perspective, explores the history of the conflict, provides insight into the main parties involved, documents key peace initiatives, analyses some of the cross-cutting issues and puts into the public arena various key agreements and texts. These should serve as a resource for reflection and learning to those currently seeking to promote peace in Acholiland and elsewhere in Uganda, as well as for those working on conflicts with comparable dynamics elsewhere in the world.

Understanding the conflict in the north

Those seeking to understand the sources and dynamics of the conflict in Acholiland need to examine: (a) its local, national and international arenas; (b) the perspectives and motivations of key protagonists; and (c) how these factors have changed over time. The articles by Ogenga Otunnu and Balam Nyeko provide insight into these issues.



At the national level, the war in Acholiland is rooted in Uganda's challenge of developing a legitimate system of governance that promotes the collective aspirations of its plural society. Political conflict – historically organised along ethnic, regional, and religious lines – has repeatedly undermined Uganda's 'nation building' project. From the beginning of Idi Amin's rule in 1971 onwards, control of the government was gained and maintained through the use of violence against opponents. The conflict in Acholiland began soon after Uganda's last regime change in January 1986, when the NRM/A took power after five years of insurgency by overthrowing a military government led by Tito Okello Lutwa, a general from Acholi. It was triggered by the NRM's methods for consolidating control over the northern parts of the country.

Within Acholiland, there were divergent response to the new NRM government. The newly victorious army was comprised of poorly integrated units, some disciplined and others bent on revenge. While there was an initial period of relative peace, some army units were responsible for instances of excessive force, extra-judicial killings and other gross human rights violations. As violence against civilians escalated, many turned toward armed struggle. This resistance eventually developed into two distinct though overlapping movements. The first was the Uganda People's Democratic Army (UPDM/A). Led by former soldiers and politicians, it proclaimed the goal of restoring multiparty democracy in Uganda. The second was the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM) and the Holy Spirit Mobile Force (HSMF) led by the charismatic figure of Alice Auma 'Lakwená', who claimed to possess supernatural powers and aimed to spiritually 'cleanse' the

Acholi people. The Holy Spirit Movement attracted tens of thousands. After a number of victories, it suffered a major defeat in late 1987. The next year the NRM concluded a settlement with the mainstream of the UPDM/A, ending one phase of the war. Yet factions of the HSM continued their struggle and were joined by the disaffected remnants of UPDA soldiers. They eventually became the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) under Joseph Kony's leadership. This movement has proved remarkably durable and resistant to military defeat. Their operations have been directed as much against the civilian population as against government targets. Under this intense pressure, Acholi society has fractured. Reuniting the community has therefore been an essential component of peacebuilding efforts.

A third dimension of the conflict is its intersection with other conflicts in the region. Although the causes of the wars in northern Uganda and southern Sudan are distinct and unrelated, they have become interlinked over time. From 1994 until recently, the Sudanese government backed the LRA, at least in part in retaliation for Uganda's support of the southern Sudan Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA). Key diplomatic initiatives in recent years, including those led by The Carter Center, focused on intergovernmental relations with mixed results. In November 2001 the LRA was proscribed as an international terrorist organisation by the US State Department, thus adding another geopolitical dimension to the war.

Negotiation initiatives

Bethuel Kiplagat describes the Kenyan efforts in 1985 to mediate an accommodation between the armed factions that resulted in the first Nairobi Agreement. This agreement could have marked a historical turning point for a political settlement based on power-sharing but the process was unable to forge a binding commitment to its implementation. In less than a month, Museveni's forces had seized the capital. For some, this gave rise to a profound mistrust of Museveni and his commitment to his agreements - a persistent theme of his opponents ever since.

Caroline Lamwaka describes the government negotiations with the UPDM/A that led to the partially successful 1988 Peace Agreement, signed in Gulu - which involved the integration of fighters into the NRA - and later talks with the external opposition UPDM politicians that resulted in the 1990 Addis Accord. Initial attempts at that time to negotiate with Kony's group were quickly abandoned. By negotiating a 'separate peace' with representatives of one faction of one armed group at a time, the NRM successfully incorporated different

elements of its opposition - a strategy it deployed in much of the country. Yet despite the subsequent concerted counter-insurgency tactics employed by the Ugandan army - with horrific human costs - the LRA's resistance persevered. In late 1993 and early 1994, the Minister for Northern Uganda Betty Bigombe made contact and initiated direct talks with the LRA. Billie O'Kadameri describes how close they came to reaching a settlement and how efforts ended abruptly when Museveni issued an ultimatum to surrender to the LRA. While the reasons for the breakdown of negotiations remain disputed, it is clear that shortly after Museveni's ultimatum - if not before - the LRA obtained Sudanese military backing, and the war resumed with renewed intensity amidst deepened mistrust.

A number of unofficial peacemaking efforts emerged in 1997 to draw the government and the LRA into peace talks. First were the efforts of Acholi in the diaspora, who converged in London at the first Kacoke Madit (a 'big meeting' of Acholi). They convened representatives of civil society, the government and the LRA to discuss the conflict and its human costs. Following the conference there was increased international interest in the humanitarian situation. James Obita describes two parallel initiatives launched by the Community Sant'Egidio and the Equatoria Civic Fund to facilitate dialogue involving the LRA and its external political wing with government representatives. Although these talks initially appeared promising, LRA infighting led to the closure of these avenues of contact and yet more attempts at a negotiated settlement ended in failure.

In 1998 The Carter Center embarked on an initiative to normalise relations between the governments of Uganda and Sudan and, by extension, to address the cross-border conflicts. Joyce Neu describes the talks between the governments that resulted in the December 1999 Nairobi Agreement and their unsuccessful efforts to involve Kony and the SPLA's John Garang in the process. Patrick Otto discusses efforts to implement the agreement and some of its paradoxical consequences. Provisions in the agreement to 'disarm and disband' the LRA - coupled with delays in communicating the agreement to Kony - apparently sparked renewed LRA attacks. The Carter Center made subsequent efforts to facilitate the implementation of the agreement amidst a proliferation of separate initiatives by other governments eager to contribute to the peace efforts. Yet the process thus far has demonstrated that reaching a bilateral agreement between the governments is only one aspect of the greater challenge of developing a process which incorporates the concerns of all those affected by the conflict.



Rosalba Oywa meeting with a self-help women's group in Gulu

Source: Robert Maletta

Civil society peacebuilding

The war has tended to be marginalised by some as an 'Acholi problem'. The sixteen years of unresolved conflict are testament to the fact that insufficient political will and resources have been devoted to the situation. Not surprisingly, some of the most persistent voices for peace have been heard from those most affected by the violence. A number of authors describe Ugandan civil society initiatives to resolve the conflict and ameliorate its consequences. Father Carlos Rodriguez describes the role of religious leaders in promoting peace and reconciliation. Rosalba Oywa explores the roles played by women and women's groups both in the war and in the search for peace. Caesar Pobllicks describes the diaspora's efforts to build a consensus for peace through the ongoing Kacoke Madit - an effort that runs counter to the general observation that diaspora communities tend to side with combatant anti-government groups and adopt extreme positions. Over time all these initiatives and others have helped to consolidate a 'constituency for peace' in the north.

Humanitarianism, justice and reconciliation

The war in Acholiland is perhaps most notorious for the LRA's abduction of thousands of children. While concern about this problem has attracted additional resources to address the humanitarian situation, it has also generated new dilemmas. Chris Dolan questions whether the humanitarian agencies have prioritised concern for LRA abductees over concern for the well-being of all the children and war-affected population who have suffered the excesses of all parties to the conflict. He also wonders whether these humanitarian responses have supplanted the need to settle the conflict itself.

Though Acholi civilians have been the principle targets of violence, the awareness that many LRA fighters were abducted forcibly from the community has given aspirations for justice and reconciliation a special poignancy. Barney Afako explores some of the dilemmas of community-led reconciliation vis-à-vis retributive justice. The government responded to calls from Acholi civil society to offer a comprehensive amnesty to encourage fighters to return home, underpinned by faith in the capacity of the community to manage effective reconciliation.



Part of the 128 LRA rebel captives rescued by the SPLA after they overran Kony's camp at Palotaka on 26 October 1995

Source: Otim Lucina

Dilemmas and challenges for peacemaking in northern Uganda

A number of cross-cutting issues emerge from the study of the various initiatives to end the war through a negotiated settlement:

Lack of engagement between the government and the LRA: One theme that emerges consistently is the perceived reluctance of both the government of Uganda and the LRA to engage with one another in political dialogue. The often-articulated government view is that the LRA lack comprehensive political objectives and therefore are 'common criminals'. While his external sympathisers in the LRM have periodically issued political manifestos, Kony and his commanders have consistently focused on describing the spiritual ideology of their movement and what they see as the historical causes of the conflict. Exacerbating this situation are barriers caused both by limited channels for communication between the senior leaders and the difficulties in developing enough empathy and common language to bridge the worldviews of the protagonists. Unless some way can be found to cross these divides, the conflict is likely to resist a negotiated settlement.

Trust and confidence: Breakdowns in earlier negotiation processes and the failure to fully implement agreements appear to have contributed to the conflict and made subsequent initiatives more difficult. Furthermore, the

consequent mistrust has impaired wider relations between the Acholi political community and Museveni's government. Acholi across the political spectrum may be united in their desire for the war to end, yet judging by parliamentary electoral results, the majority continue to mistrust Museveni and support the political opposition. While there are substantive issues that need to be addressed to transform this climate of mistrust – including dealing with the legacies of the past – it may also be necessary to explore perceptions and acknowledge the consequences of breakdowns in earlier peace initiatives.

Addressing the causes and consequences of conflict: Acholi are intimately aware of the destruction and suffering caused by both parties to the conflict. They believe that the government has pursued a military strategy that has neither defeated the LRA nor ultimately brought security to the civilian population. Mutual belligerence in rejecting the option for peace is a source of great frustration and resentment. Have the government and the LRA, or factions within them both, separately developed a vested interest in the war continuing? Do they have the political will to end the violence? Whatever the answers, these speculations reveal how this protracted war has generated a wider conflict that is likely to be transformed only once the fighting has stopped and the structural violence suffered by so many in the north is addressed.