

The peace process in northern Uganda 1986-1990

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Growth of a rebellion

The Uganda People's Democratic Movement/Army (UPDM/A) was the first armed opposition to Yoweri Museveni's government. Its leadership was mainly drawn from former Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA) soldiers from Gulu and Kitgum districts, where its operations were concentrated. Formed in July 1986, it launched its first attacks against the National Resistance Movement/Army (NRM/A) that August. Four months later, a second armed movement – Alice Auma Lakwenya's Holy Spirit Mobile Force (HSMF), precursor of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) – emerged in Acholiland.

Human rights abuses were important in the origins of the war in Acholiland. When the victorious NRA arrived in Gulu and Kitgum in March 1986, it called on former UNLA soldiers who had resettled in their villages to hand over their weapons. Some did so, reporting directly to the NRA. Others reported with their guns to members of the recently established Resistance Council (local administrative structures established by the NRM/A) or to church leaders, whom they trusted more.

At first, NRA soldiers in Gulu were well-disciplined and respectful. However, serious breakdowns in discipline occurred among troops supervising the surrender of firearms. Some former UNLA soldiers were arrested and mistreated, and torture was alleged to be widespread. Killings were reported, although the number of dead is not known. Some former soldiers were taken away for 'political re-education' and never seen again. Fears in Acholiland were further fuelled by the order on 10 May 1986 for all former UNLA soldiers to report to NRA military headquarters in Kampala. Few could forget a similar order during the Idi Amin era that led to the massacre of Acholi soldiers. Many began to believe that the NRM government was determined to victimise the Acholi people and some began to mobilise to fight the government. Many Acholis supported them.



NRA soldiers often justified their looting and harassment of civilians as revenge for the abuses allegedly committed by Acholi UNLA soldiers in the Luwero triangle during the previous five years. They would tell people, 'We are recovering our properties from Luwero.' This reinforced perceptions that the NRA/M viewed people from the north as its enemies. More than 40 people were murdered in August in Namokora, north-east of Kitgum, by an NRA battalion largely composed of former Federal Democratic Movement of Uganda (FEDEMU) soldiers who saw Namokora simply as the home of Tito Okello, commander of the army that had tortured them. A similar pattern of incidents and interpretations led to the outbreak of insurgency in Teso and Lango in February 1987. As the UPDA/NRA conflict flared, many unarmed civilians were arrested. Those arrested in battle areas were taken as 'prisoners of war'. Some of these were former UNLA soldiers, who claimed to have no association with the emerging rebel group. Nevertheless, with or without mistreatment by the NRA, some of the former UNLA soldiers might still have posed problems for the government and local population simply because they still had arms.

The move towards peace

The first sustained effort to negotiate an end to the violence began on 31 October 1986, when a civil society 'goodwill peace mission' went to meet the UPDM/A in the bush after receiving President Museveni's endorsement. Tiberio Okeny Atwoma, an Acholi elder and politician, led the five-man team. He said they initiated the peace move because the conflict was causing much bloodshed and a humanitarian crisis was looming.

The team members hoped the UPDM/A command, largely composed of Acholi fighters, would be willing to talk to fellow Acholis. After a 145-day trip through Kitgum district and up to Juba in southern Sudan and back again, they prepared a report for Museveni and the NRM. They recommended talks between the government and the UPDM/A military leaders. The report also recommended the exclusion of UPDM political leaders based abroad. The UPDM/A felt that the exiles – with the exception of the external coordinator, Colonel Wilson Owiny Omoya – had not effectively supported them. It is not clear whether the idea of excluding the exiled politicians (who were not yet effectively organised as a political wing) came from the UPDM/A or from the peace team. At a press conference in Kampala in March 1987 the peace

team said the UPDM/A recognised only Col Omoya. The peace team also recommended an amnesty for the fighters. The government eventually agreed to both recommendations. By May, Parliament passed a general Amnesty Act. Ex-soldiers and intelligence officers who served under the former regimes and opposition fighters would not be prosecuted for such crimes as treason, theft or torture; but people who committed murder, kidnap with intent to murder, or rape would stand trial. Many UPDA fighters saw this 'partial amnesty' as a trick rather than a gesture of goodwill before the peace talks.

NRA-UPDA peace talks

In November 1987, Museveni signalled to Maj. Gen. Salim Saleh, his younger brother and the NRA's Chief of Combat and Operations, to start talking to the UPDM/A. Saleh contacted the UPDA soldiers through civilian 'co-ordinators'.

It took four months, from November 1987 to March 1988, for the parties to consult and build enough mutual trust, through sporadic contacts and correspondence, to establish mechanisms for negotiations. However, this period was not without its mishaps. For instance, Lt Steven Obote, one of two UPDM/A officers co-ordinating the peace efforts with the NRA, was 'accidentally' killed by the NRA in March 1988, as he tried to organise a meeting between senior UPDM/A officers and NRA commanders. His relatives believe he was killed deliberately, and that if top UPDM/A commanders had been present they would all have been killed. Obote's death, however, did not ultimately impede the talks.

A notable feature of the process was that it was driven by army-to-army negotiations. NRM government officials and the external political wing of the UPDM were both left out, apparently because the soldiers believed that the politicians, known for their uncompromising attitudes, might obstruct the negotiations. The NRA and UPDM/A considered themselves field men who had seen the human suffering behind the conflict: disease, hunger, death and destruction. They were determined to end the bloodshed and the enormous human suffering.

Communication between the UPDM/A on the ground and its external wing was very limited. When Charles Alai, UPDM Chairman in Gulu, was asked at a conference of Acholis in Kampala on 16 April why the external wing of the UPDM was not involved, he declared that they had 'no room for opportunists'. For their part, the leadership in exile felt excluded from the negotiation process and therefore opposed it. These divisions created unfinished business for the peace process.

Part of the reason the UPDM/A had so little respect for their exiled political leadership was that the military wing directed the military campaign and controlled the organisation. The politicians were seen as only talking from abroad over the BBC from the comfort of their London homes. With some exceptions they gave little material support to the UPDM/A on the ground. The open split between the UPDA soldiers and the UPDM politicians in exile was an obvious weakness which the NRM exploited. Several times in March-April 1988, Museveni claimed that he was not a politician, but an intellectual. He also averted anger and impatience among the NRA by showing the public that he was in favour of peace talks.

Peace talks between the NRA and the UPDM/A opened on 17 March 1988, at the Acholi Inn in Gulu, with the joint declaration of a ceasefire. At the first meeting, elder Vincent Olanya chaired the talks, with elder Eliya Obita as secretary. The NRA team was led by Salim Saleh. The UPDM/A delegation was led by Lt Col John Angelo Okello, Commander of UPDA Division One in Gulu, accompanied by Maj. Mike Kilama and Charles Alai. Significantly, the UPDA's overall commander, Brigadier Justine Odong Latek, was absent, although the negotiators said that he backed the talks. The UPDM/A said they had been forced to take up arms against the government because of human rights abuses committed by NRA soldiers. Additionally, some fled and joined the insurrection because of false reports by local government collaborators who accused them of having concealed caches of arms and of being involved in anti-government activities.

NRA commanders Col Pecos Kuteesa and Lt Col Julius Aine conceded that violations may have occurred, but stressed that these were not government policy. Major Gen. Saleh observed that there were 'bad elements' within the NRA who committed atrocities and that 'this reflected badly on the NRA, which was a decent and disciplined army.'

The delegates produced what Saleh described as a 'draft agreement' that required ratification by both high commands. This first meeting focused on jobs for ex-combatants, and the promotion and integration of UPDA soldiers into the NRA. The second round of talks was held the next afternoon in a closed environment and further talks took place on 20-21 March 1988. In this round the elders were excluded because the UPDM/A and the NRA both believed they were too closely associated with the 'old politicians who would seek to confuse them'. The UPDM/A and some sections of Acholi civil society, represented by certain elders, were divided on their views on the insurgency and how to achieve peace. Those closely allied to the government through the local Resistance Council structures had campaigned for a

surrender, whereas the UPDM/A wanted to stop fighting under a peace agreement. Saleh later blamed the then information minister, Abubakar Mayanja, for sounding an alarm over Radio Uganda and Uganda Television that 'amnesty is expiring on 31 March. Run, run for your life'. Saleh said that this could have jeopardised the peace process.

At the end of the negotiations, on 21 March, Kilama and Saleh emerged from the Acholi Inn boardroom visibly pleased with developments at the negotiation table. 'The NRA and the former armies are united,' commented Saleh. 'We shall not allow politicians to confuse us. We agreed that the army should stay outside politics. We had been formerly misused and we had been the losers.' Saleh said later, however, that the two armies hoped that the politicians would join them at a later stage after the soldiers had resolved their differences.

These talks resulted in agreement on several principles. First, there would be an immediate ceasefire and UPDA troops would receive cash ration allowances – to signal the start of integration. Recruitment into the NRA would be open to all UPDA soldiers without any form of victimisation so as to create one national army. Appointments to military rank made by any Ugandan head of state would be retained – subject to confirmation by Museveni and after scrutiny of the individual soldiers. Together they would tackle the Holy Spirit Movement alliance (HSM) fighters of Joseph Kony and Severino Lukoya – who were by then fighting both the NRA and the UPDM/A – and the problem of Karamajong cattle rustling. According to Kilama, 'We are coming out fully to join government but not as those who have surrendered. We are coming to join hands with the NRA to work and rebuild our nation.'

As news of the negotiations spread, sharp – but mostly private – criticism was voiced by politicians who seemed to resent the army's move. Many doubted that Museveni and other NRM leaders had approved the talks. Some, in southern Uganda in particular, believed that the UPDA should surrender unconditionally. Some in the UPDM/A wanted to continue the struggle for a military victory, arguing that the failure of the 1985 Nairobi agreement showed that the NRM could not be trusted. UPDA overall commander Odong Latek reportedly denied authorising the negotiations and reaffirmed the military campaign. Despite this, many ordinary civilians and soldiers seemed encouraged at the prospect of peace in Acholiland.

Meeting with Museveni

The ceasefire agreed to at the Gulu talks held and the two forces began to cooperate on regional security, addressing cattle rustling in particular. Several weeks later,

a delegation of two UPDM/A representatives and six elders travelled from Gulu to meet Museveni in Entebbe on 9 April 1988. A separate delegation of about eight UPDM/A officers was flown to Kampala to tour the area and see the developments that had taken place in the south since 1986. The UPDM/A delegation advocated the immediate integration of soldiers from different parts of the country into the NRA to prevent further human rights violations. Their argument was that field commanders would hesitate to order abuses if their forces included people from the area concerned. They also asked for measures to help rehabilitate and develop Acholiland and for political and socio-economic reform in Uganda.

After a three-hour meeting between the UPDM/A representatives and Museveni, a presidential pardon was declared for troops who 'surrendered' – the amnesty had already expired. The UPDA soldiers demanded the release of prisoners of war and a waiver of taxes for Gulu and Kitgum districts for two years. The President accordingly suspended graduated taxation in Acholi. Several days later, Museveni wrote to the UPDM/A high command, calling on them to join in the reconstruction and development of the country and reassuring them that continued NRA deployment was not aimed at them. Museveni's support for the talks remained ambiguous and appeals were made to him at the time to talk to the UPDM external political wing to win their official support for the peace process.

First efforts at dialogue with Kony

While Museveni held talks with the elders and the UPDM/A delegation at Entebbe, NRA and HSM commanders met at the Acholi Inn, thanks in part to the efforts of the two elders who had helped to coordinate the NRA-UPDM/A talks. HSM Commander James Kidega said, 'our coming to town shows that peace cannot be achieved only through one way. The armed struggle should be a last resort. That is why we are trying to establish a ceasefire.' It was at this time the Holy Spirit groups of Joseph Kony, Severino Okoya and Philip Ojuk merged. In June, Kony wrote a letter to Col Kuteesa of the NRA requesting a meeting. Kuteesa observed that Kony did not want to be left out, that he wanted to talk peace and did not want to see more people dying. But owing to an alleged breakdown in communications, NRA mobile forces attacked Kony before the talks could begin. An Anglican priest, Abel Okumu, who attempted to broker dialogue at this time, was labelled a traitor by the HSM and killed shortly afterwards. Senior NRA commanders found it difficult to grasp the HSM's ideology. Saleh said that they 'should come back to reality first before they talk to us'. The failure of these initiatives was to have lasting consequences. Fighters loyal to Kony resumed their raids on civilian and NRA targets.

Fragmentation and consolidation

Although talks between the NRA and the HSM collapsed, negotiations between the UPDM and the NRA were accelerating. In a move intended to deepen trust between the NRA and UPDM, on 25 April Saleh flew to UPDM headquarters to meet Latek. Saleh was accompanied only by Lt Col Aine and UPDA commanders – despite Museveni's concern at the security risk. When Saleh returned, he spoke positively of the meeting. He was reassured that Latek supported the peace process and dissociated himself from the earlier statement rejecting it.

After this meeting, the UPDM/A and NRA continued to discuss implementation of the draft agreement. Yet the process remained controversial and the UPDM/A's internal tensions continued. On 8 May 1988, the UPDM/A called a press conference to announce that it had voted Odong Latek out of the overall command and replaced him with Lt Col Okello. They also voted out the UPDM/A chair, former Prime Minister Eric Otema Allimadi, and dissociated themselves from the political wing, the UPDM, which had denounced the talks. It seemed that Latek, who had remained distant from the trust-building process between the NRA and the UPDM/A, retained his distrust in the negotiations. The UPDM/A commented that while UPDM leaders had made disparaging comments about their peace initiative on foreign broadcasts, Museveni had cordially received their delegation. Moreover, Acholi in Uganda had warmly welcomed the talks. At the end of the press conference, Okello announced that they would sign the peace agreement as soon as most of the points agreed in principle were implemented. After this, the UPDA and the NRA formed a joint force, replacing the NRA mobile units, to address local security issues. This demonstrated that they could cooperate effectively, thus further consolidating trust.

The Pece Peace Accord

On 3 June 1988, the peace agreement was signed in Pece stadium Gulu before about 5,000 people. The agreement called for:

- cessation of hostilities between the NRM and the UPDM/A, integration of the UPDM/A into the NRA/NRM, and release of prisoners of war;
- resettlement of displaced people and rehabilitation of infrastructure destroyed by the war;
- establishment of a government endorsed by the people of Uganda, an expansion of Parliament, and a Constituent Assembly to discuss a new constitution.

Certain provisions of the agreement were implemented immediately, notably the release of prisoners of war and the integration of UPDM/A combatants into the NRA.

Despite the deployment of some ex-UPDA troops and their commanders in the northern districts, the peace process was beset by setbacks and some members of Acholi civil society and former UPDA commanders felt betrayed by it.

An event that undermined trust in the NRM throughout Acholiland was the killing of Mike Kilama (ex-UPDA), who was widely respected throughout the north, by NRA border troops in February 1990. The circumstances of his death remain mysterious. It occurred at a time when a number of soldiers, including former UPDA officers, were arrested on suspicion of plotting a coup. It is unclear whether Kilama was involved – people close to him deny it – but it seems he feared arrest and may have attempted to flee. The government never issued an official explanation for Kilama's death nor demonstrated regret.

Capt. Majid Atiku, a battalion commander based in Moroto, also fled the country during that period, as did Maj. Walter Odoch, who survived a grenade attack on his house. Atiku went to the former Zaire (now DRC). The government made the mistake of trying to make arrests at a time when goodwill and trust were at a premium. Perhaps confident of its position after reaching agreement with the UPDM/A and having deployed them under its command, the government felt strong enough to take any action it deemed appropriate.

Many of those arrested later died in prison. This severely eroded the popular trust in the government that had been generated by the peace process. Then former UPDA soldiers were re-deployed away from Gulu and Kitgum to stations in the south, leading to rumours that they had been arrested or even killed. Moreover, the government's failure fully to implement the development and rehabilitation projects envisioned in the agreement gave the impression that it lacked a firm commitment to development in the north, or even had a hidden agenda to 'under-develop' it.

The Pece Agreement did not end the war in Acholiland. The HSM continued its armed struggle supported by people who distrusted the NRM, as did a faction of the UPDA led by Latek with support from the exiled UPDM. Kony's HSM also abducted former fighters who sought to return home. Insecurity continued in the region.

The government's counter-insurgency campaign increasingly threatened the lives and livelihoods of people in Acholiland and allegations of atrocities resurfaced. The government's stated aim was to 'annihilate the rebels'. Part of the strategy was to deny them access to food – by destroying civilian food stocks and domestic animals – and other resources that could strengthen them politically, economically and militarily. In October 1988, the government began the mass evacuation of civilians from war zones without providing



UPDF official Dr. Akena Adoko addresses a public meeting in Gulu in September 1990 to explain the Addis Accord and peace initiative

Source: Ben Ochan

adequately for their basic care. Thus, in the months following the peace agreement, the war's impact on civilians became much more severe and widespread.

The UPDM and the Addis Accord

Nevertheless, in August 1989 the NRM leadership initiated secret contacts with UPDM leaders in London, Nairobi, Lusaka and elsewhere in an effort to negotiate a final agreement. The NRM's envoy, Ateker Ejalu, had been involved in the peace process between the Uganda People's Army (UPA) rebels and the NRM in Teso in 1986–1990. The UPDM delegation was led by Otema Allimadi. Ejalu started by informing them that the government was extending a full amnesty, and invited them to come home or at least feel free to return and participate in rebuilding the country. The UPDM identified its main grievances as harassment of the northern people, lack of development in the north, and dismissal of northerners from public service. After months of negotiation, a compromise was reached, and on 14 July 1990 the Addis Accord was agreed. It provided that all UPDM soldiers and officers should leave their operational bases under their respective commanders. The UPDM also agreed to participate in the constitution-making and political debates taking place in the country.

Interviewed at the time of the signing of the agreement Allimadi said 'he would have a persuasive influence on the Holy Spirit faction of Joseph Kony'. He first returned to Uganda in 1990 and then came back to settle in 1992. When interviewed in February 1999, he indicated that the government had fulfilled all provisions of the agreement. He said, 'The most important thing was that I would come and government would look after my security. This was fulfilled.' But he was disappointed that the rebels still fighting in northern Uganda did not heed his call. 'I thought my presence here and the calls I had been making to them to return home would be effective. And I must say I was disappointed.'

Conclusion

Despite peace efforts, war has continued in Acholi between the NRA, now known as the Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF), and Kony's LRA. Tens of thousands of people have been killed or maimed and more than 350,000 are still displaced. A whole generation of children has been denied access to basic education.

Since for the last fifteen years the military solution has not worked and is unlikely to work in the near future, there is a need for the government to actively promote dialogue and reconciliation with the rebels and with the local people in war-affected areas. It should declare its commitment to a peaceful resolution of the conflict at both national and regional levels. The process of dialogue and reconciliation should involve all the armed groups, government, local political leaders, elders, opinion leaders, religious leaders and others. If ending the war is a matter of urgency, there is a need for multi-faceted approaches.