

Restoring relations between Uganda and Sudan:

The Carter Center process

Joyce Neu

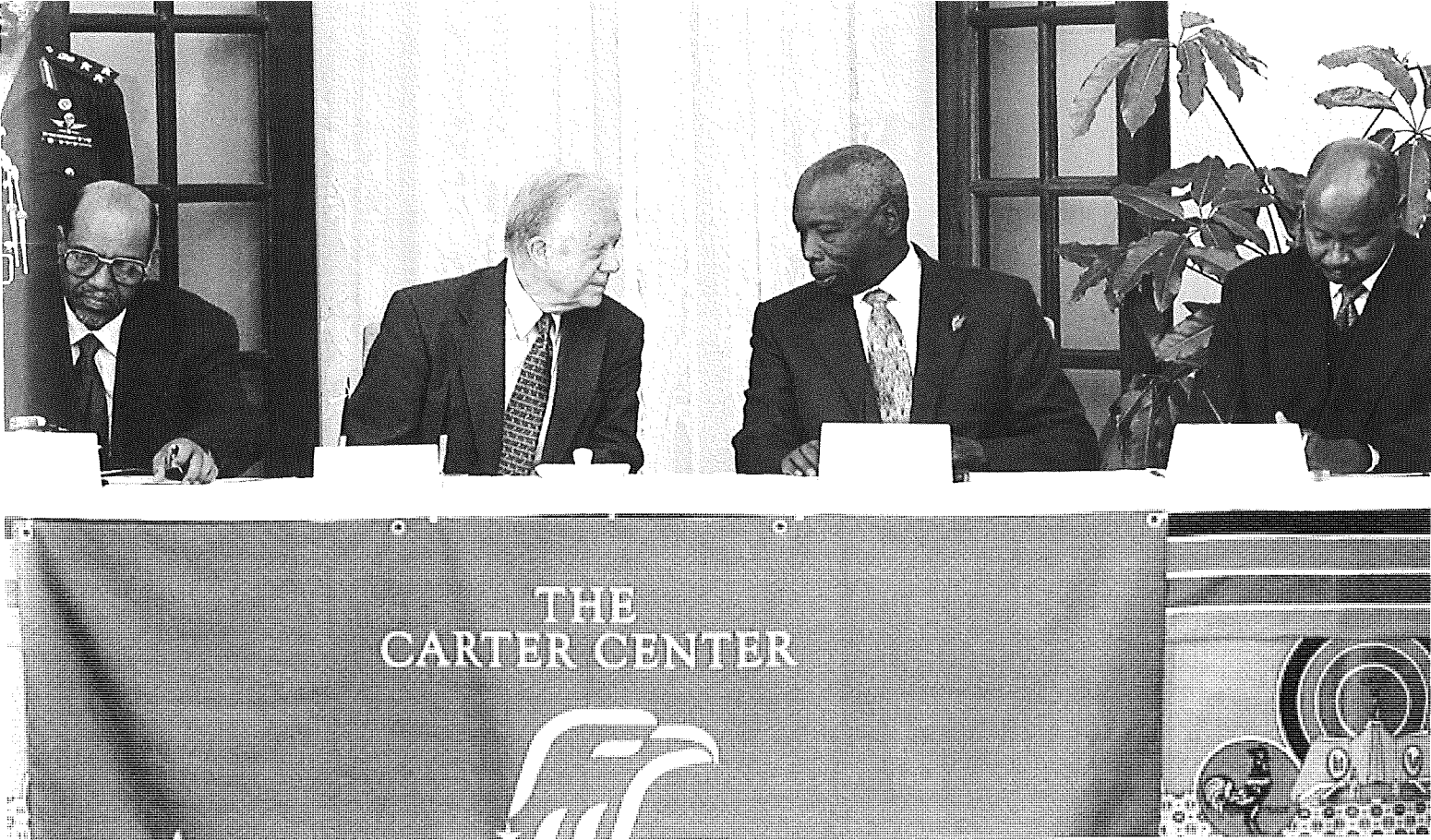
Joyce Neu is the first director of the newly-established Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice in San Diego, California. Dr Neu previously worked with The Carter Center in Atlanta, where she helped facilitate discussions between parties in conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Congo-Brazzaville, Ethiopia, Mali, Sudan and Uganda.

Efforts to end the war in northern Uganda have been entwined with the wider dynamics of hostility between the governments of Uganda and Sudan and war in south Sudan. Each government has accused the other of violating the common frontier and supporting the other's insurgents. Diplomatic relations between the two states were severed in 1995, allegedly because of Sudan's support for the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in retaliation for the government of Uganda's participation in the Sudanese government's war against the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A). In early 1999, the governments of Sudan and Uganda asked former US President Jimmy Carter to help normalise relations.

Decision to negotiate

A central question was why the two presidents decided at that point to request help to resolve their differences, and why they approached Carter. The two countries were not at war, nor were they suffering a 'hurting stalemate' that might encourage them to seek a negotiated settlement. Their motives appear to have been less direct.

Sudan was on a 'charm offensive' to improve relations with its neighbours. Although the Sudanese government used the LRA to fight the SPLA, The Carter Center believed this was not decisive in the balance of military power, and the government might have judged that it could afford to cease supporting the LRA so as to improve its international standing. Sudan also had reasons to involve a former US president. The Clinton administration had declared Sudan a terrorist state for its alleged role in the assassination attempt on Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and for hosting Osama bin Laden, accused of masterminding the 1998 bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. In August 1998, the US fired missiles into a suburb of Khartoum to destroy an alleged chemical weapons factory. By late 1998, the Sudanese government wanted to improve relations with the US and knew that Carter had been a friend to Sudan in the past. They believed Carter had access to Clinton and could influence US policy on Sudan.



Uganda's interest in re-establishing relations with Sudan was less clear. Uganda enjoyed privileged status with the US government, and US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright had characterised President Yoweri Museveni as one of the 'new generation of African leaders'. Museveni may have been motivated to reduce military spending to conform to World Bank requirements on debt repayments. In addition, the Ugandan People's Defence Forces (UPDF) were fighting on three fronts: in the north against the LRA; in the west against the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) in the northwest against the West Nile Bank Front (WNBF) and the Uganda National Rescue Front II (UNRF II); and, most notably, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) where Ugandan troops were fighting armies from Angola, Namibia, Zimbabwe and even their erstwhile ally Rwanda. Museveni may have wanted to withdraw troops from the north and west to send to the DRC. Uganda's continued presence in the DRC was not popular with some donor 'allies' in the West.

The Carter Center's role

Since 1988, former US President Jimmy Carter and the Conflict Resolution Program at The Carter Center had tried to help resolve the Sudanese civil war. In 1995, Carter negotiated a ceasefire with the SPLA commander, Dr John Garang, and Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir. Called the 'Guinea Worm Ceasefire', it allowed health workers access to areas where the disease was endemic. Carter hoped the ceasefire would create space for peace talks to resume between the SPLM/A and the government of Sudan. Unfortunately, this did not happen.

The regional Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) led international efforts to support peacemaking for Sudan during the late 1990s, but a definitive settlement remained elusive. IGAD and the newer Egyptian-Libyan mediation continued attempts to resolve the Sudanese civil war, and a breakthrough on the Sudan-Uganda stalemate appeared likely in spring 1999, when Presidents al-Bashir and Museveni invited Carter to help restore their diplomatic relations. Although Carter later received a similar request from LRA leader Joseph Kony, a parallel invitation from Garang was not forthcoming. Discussions within The Carter Center focused on responding to the invitations from Bashir and Museveni and on the prospects for obtaining Kony's and Garang's participation in the process. Carter accepted the invitations, believing that improvement in relations between Sudan and Uganda might serve as a catalyst to advance the Sudanese peace talks.

These invitations were not completely unexpected. In late 1998, Jongomoi Okidi-Olal, a Ugandan-American, acting in his personal capacity but then under the sponsorship of the Acholi diaspora peace network Kacoke Madit (based in London), initiated efforts to reach an agreement. He met the presidents and senior officials of Sudan and Uganda, and senior commanders of the LRA and SPLA. Sudanese, Ugandan and LRA leaders all agreed in principle to negotiate. Although no ceasefire was formally declared, hostilities between the LRA and the UPDF quieted in 1999. Okidi discussed both substantive and procedural issues with the combatant groups and all agreed to third-party mediation. Okidi looked to key figures in the US to provide this mediation and proposed President Carter to the parties.

Establishing relations with the parties

When Carter received the letters from Bashir and Museveni in April 1999 relationships were already established and both knew Carter's style. Yet the Carter Center staff who would facilitate the process had not developed political contacts in the region, so for several months they consulted experts to develop the knowledge required to intervene effectively and develop a workable agreement.

The Carter Center's goal was to restore bilateral relations by holding talks between the four warring parties. The assumption was that an agreement would need to include a pledge to cease support for the other country's insurgency movements. Therefore Bashir, Museveni, Garang and Kony would all need to be involved. The Carter Center considered including others in the process (e.g. civil society groups), but was advised against this and to keep the process as quiet as possible. There appeared to be great fear that any public discussion of a peace process would alarm Kony and prevent his participation. From the beginning, the Carter Center was concerned to ensure participation of the armed movements, while recognising this would be a challenge. Although Carter had met Garang many times, in recent years Garang had failed to appear at prearranged meetings with Carter and their relationship was not strong. Neither Carter nor the centre's staff knew Kony but believed, from conversations with Okidi and other Uganda experts, that securing his participation would be the greatest challenge. Carter wrote to Garang and Kony informing them that he had been asked to mediate between the two governments and urging them to take part in the process.

In June 1999, Carter sent a delegation to meet the governments and insurgent leaders to explore the parameters of the talks and the issues to be negotiated. As The Carter Center's representative, the author travelled to Sudan and Uganda with Vince Farley, a former US diplomat, engaged by The Carter Center as a consultant. Okidi met us in the region and accompanied us in our meetings. Our objectives were:

- a) to meet the negotiating teams designated by each president and discuss the preconditions to re-establishing relations;
- b) to agree on a time and an agenda for a first meeting between the negotiating teams;
- c) to gain Bashir's and Museveni's assistance in arranging meetings with the armed movements, with the goal of including them in whatever talks would follow; and
- d) to begin building trust with Kony and to secure his participation in the talks.

The trip began in Sudan, with a meeting with the Foreign Minister and members of the contact group led by Dr Nafie ali Nafie, Advisor on Peace to the president. They raised the previous accords they had signed with

Museveni, said the same issues remained and that these had to be discussed in any peace process. These included:

a) security concerns:

- not using each other's territories for incursions by rebels;
- removing the logistical centres for the other's rebels in each country;
- moving refugee camps out of border areas (out of SPLA lines);

b) confidence-building steps:

- improving treatment of refugees (forced recruitment of Sudanese refugees in Uganda into the SPLA);
- halting Uganda's negative propaganda against Sudan;
- establishing bilateral or multilateral monitoring teams;
- re-establishing diplomatic relations.

The team also discussed arrangements for Kony's parents to travel to Khartoum to see their son, whom they had not seen or spoken to in 13 years. Kony's mother had told Okidi that she wanted to urge her son to stop fighting. It was thought that a face-to-face meeting would be a valuable confidence-building gesture. The Sudanese authorities agreed to cooperate, but said they were not sure it would be possible for The Carter Center delegates to meet Kony on this trip.

On 30 June, in Uganda, the team met Museveni and his negotiators, led by Dr Ruhakana Rugunda, Minister for the Presidency and a key confidante and advisor to the president. Museveni said that there were two problems between Sudan and Uganda: the LRA and the Sudanese civil war. The first, he said, could be resolved; the second was much more difficult because Uganda could not stand by while the government of Sudan tried to 'make Africans into Arabs'. Museveni made it clear that the SPLA and the LRA were not comparable: one was fighting for its 'identity' and the other was a 'terrorist' group. He said that Uganda was supporting the SPLA and that if anyone could 'pressurize Garang', he could; but he would do so only for a 'principled agreement'. Museveni indicated that although he had previously refused direct negotiations with Kony, he would not reject them now. He also agreed to enable Kony to meet his parents in Sudan; the Ugandan government would pay their travel costs for a one week visit.

The Ugandan contact group and The Carter Center team had further discussions. The Ugandans noted that:

- a) they did not know what the goals of the LRA were, so it would be difficult to address them;
- b) diaspora groups were not helpful;
- c) the SPLA and the LRA could not be linked; and
- d) they would respond to a proposal for an agenda for the meeting with the Sudanese contact group.

Once these agreements were secured, arrangements were made to bring Kony's parents to Khartoum, but a meeting between Kony and his parents fell through. It appears that there was a breakdown in communications. Kony expected to meet them in the LRA camp outside Juba and did not travel to Khartoum. The attempted confidence-building measure backfired, undermining both Kony's trust in the process and trust within the mediation team. The mediators continued to seek meetings with Kony on two subsequent trips, and through verbal and written messages, but were unsuccessful. A major problem was that we had to rely on the Sudanese government to convey messages to him. When we finally established an alternative channel, it proved unreliable and slow. The invitation to participate in the December 1999 summit, therefore, reached him only days before, and he said that it gave him inadequate time to prepare.

Because Museveni had made clear that he was not inclined to pressure Garang, and because Garang had neither responded to Carter's letter nor shown up at scheduled appointments, The Carter Center delegation again consulted Bashir and Museveni. They urged us to move forward with re-establishing bilateral relations without the insurgent leaders. We returned to Atlanta and began planning.

The negotiations

Preliminary talks began in London in August 1999 with a meeting between the Sudanese and Ugandan contact groups. The most contentious issue was the case of the Aboke girls. The Ugandan delegation insisted the girls had to be returned for relations to be normalised. By the time of the London meeting, the girls' plight had become a highly political issue in Uganda and abroad. The Sudanese government objected to the Government of Uganda singling out the issue, saying that they were using it to draw negative attention to Sudan. Over the first day or two, the government delegations exchanged documents listing their grievances and positions on re-establishing bilateral relations. Putting their positions on paper seemed to fix them and made the discussions very difficult.

After several days, the government delegations agreed on many issues, including stopping support for each other's rebel movements, but there was no consensus on how to address the issue of the Aboke girls. Before leaving London, both sides agreed on the need to meet again before a summit of the heads of state.

Preparations for the summit

As I prepared to return to Sudan and Uganda to meet the contact groups, Carter made calls to both presidents urging their cooperation and setting dates for the

summit. The Sudanese said they would help to ensure Kony's participation. At the same time, they wanted reassurance that Garang would be there, which Carter could not give. By this time, early November, it seemed unlikely that Museveni could or would exert pressure on Garang to participate. In November and December 1999 I made another trip to the region, accompanied by a Carter Center colleague and by former Ugandan Minister for Northern Reconstruction, Betty Bigombe. While in Khartoum, the delegation again sought to meet Kony but succeeded only in meeting one of his deputies. He assured us that Kony had received the invitation from President Carter, but it arrived too late for Kony to prepare adequately. We asked that Kony reconsider, and that if he could not participate, to designate a representative to attend. In Kampala we met Museveni, who assured us of his willingness to talk to the LRA.

The Nairobi talks 6-9 December 1999

The Sudanese and Ugandan contact groups arrived in Nairobi for pre-talks on 5 December, two days before Bashir, Carter, and Museveni. The facilitation team had drafted an agreement that each group read and commented on. During these first two days, aside from having some meals together, the parties did not meet face-to-face. Instead, the facilitation team met each group separately to discuss the points of the agreement. (This was done at the insistence of the Executive Director of The Carter Center, who feared the contact groups might cancel the summit. The facilitation team disagreed, understanding the desire of the contact groups to meet together before their presidents arrived to ensure that the text of the agreement was acceptable). By the afternoon of 7 December, the facilitators believed we had a text that both presidents could agree to. We continued to wait for word on whether the LRA might yet send someone to the talks, but were not very hopeful.

Carter and Bashir arrived in Nairobi on 7 December, and Museveni sent word that he would arrive the next morning. After I briefed Carter on the two days of preliminary meetings, he and I met that night with Bashir and Ambassador Mahdi Ibrahim, a key member of the Sudanese contact group and former Sudanese Ambassador to the US. Carter and Bashir discussed US policy on Sudan, and Carter noted that without Garang's participation, there was little he could do on that score. Carter referred to Sudan's relationship with Kony and reports of slavery in Sudan as 'indefensible'. He went through all the points of the agreement with Bashir and they agreed to a timetable for restoring relations with Uganda. The meeting ended after 10pm. We then went to meet the Ugandan contact group, without Museveni. The Ugandan team reiterated the need to release the Aboke girls and Carter assured them The Carter Center would help with efforts to get the children out of Sudan.

By the next morning, Carter had re-worked the text of the agreement so that he could present it to Museveni. Carter met with Museveni, talked about Garang and the Sudan peace process and then went through the 11-point agreement point by point. Museveni agreed to release Sudanese prisoners of war. Carter asked that the Aboke girls' case not be the obstacle to an agreement. He said he had the names of all the girls and would ensure their release. He offered to send his son Chip to guarantee this. Museveni asked that restoration of relations be contingent on implementation of the points of the agreement.

As Carter went back and forth between the two presidents in a method he first used at Camp David in 1978 – the 'single document approach' – each head of state and his contact group made and reviewed modifications. By mid-afternoon on 8 December, earlier than any of us had thought possible, we had agreement. Kenyan President Daniel Arap Moi was quickly notified and a signing ceremony was held at State House with Carter and Moi as witnesses. Bashir and Museveni shook hands, and the Nairobi Agreement came into existence.

But the presidents had asked Carter for more. Previous agreements between the two countries had collapsed as soon as the ink was dry because of lack of trust. They asked for The Carter Center to remain engaged and to oversee implementation. On 9 December, with Bashir and Museveni gone, the two contact groups met again with the facilitation team. It was decided to retire the contact groups once teams had been created to implement the agreement. We all agreed to meet in six weeks in Nairobi and each side agreed to take some constructive action in that time to implement the agreement.

Conclusion

In June 2000, I left The Carter Center after almost nine years. My successor on this project continues the work, and many of the obstacles of 1999 remain as divisive now as they were then. Importantly, however, with the continued cooperation of UNICEF and the Norwegian and Dutch governments, more abducted children have been released.

Just as obstacles remain, so do quandaries. Foremost among them is, does the Ugandan government have an interest in maintaining an unstable north? It is difficult to understand why the UPDF has not suppressed the LRA, which has come close to extinction several times. For the Sudanese government, the LRA has clearly proved useful in fighting the SPLA. If it were truly willing to give up this ally, why has it not yet negotiated a deal to relocate the LRA or to re-patriate them from Sudan?



Sudanese President Bashir (left) and Ugandan President Museveni seal the Nairobi Agreement with a handshake, as former US President Carter (second from left) looks on, 8 Dec 1999

Source: Agence France Presse

The dilemmas of the conflict between Sudan and Uganda may be challenging to unravel, but they are deadly to thousands of children who care only to live in peace and safety. The mediation process undertaken by The Carter Center was intended to save lives and bring peace. It has not yet done so. But it has not yet failed. Sadly, we may need to look back on this process as just one in a series that was one step towards peace, but perhaps not the ultimate one.

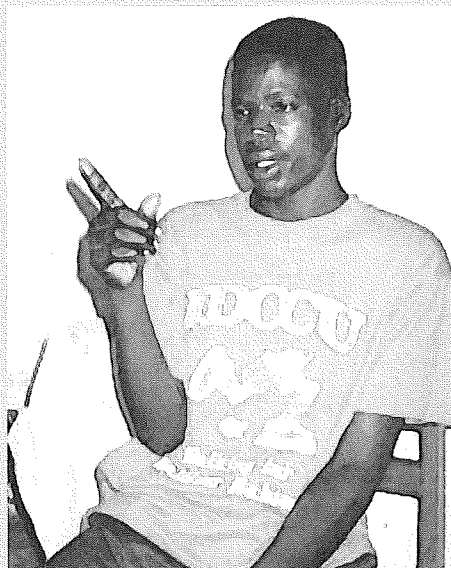
Charles Ochaya was abducted by the LRA in 1995

First they abducted my brother, then swooped again that evening on our village and snatched several of us. That was in 1995. I was in P3.

Life was hard. We started plundering villages for foodstock. When the stock got exhausted before another raid, we picked wild leaves, boiled them and drank for the day's meal.

I thought of my loving mother back home. I was her last born son and feared dying without seeing her. I risked escape. More people could escape but many of them fear they may not reach home. The women are told that escape means being captured by the Arabs as sex slaves. The captives also fear the hostile armed Dinka tribesmen. If the Ugandan and Sudanese governments could persuade the Dinka to receive the runaway captives, most combatants would have escaped.

As for me, I need basic physical necessities like housing and beddings. I still fear the rebels left in the bush. I just want to go back home and see what has become of it in my long absence. I want to gain a vocation.



Seneth Aol Opobo tells of her capture and imprisonment by the LRA

The rebels yanked us out of sleep and ordered us out. [They] released Mother and our seven year-old brother since several of her children had been abducted. At Jabelein I was given to Kony. Because I hoped to return to school one day, I acted the mad and AIDS-infected girl. I wanted to avoid pregnancy because once you have delivered there's no escape. Luckily Kony did not accept me into his household. [Kony's lieutenant] was directed to deploy me in the hospital since I was educated. But I didn't know anything to do with syringes, midwifery, etc. I got introductory training and learnt the rest from a big medical handbook.

On April 20, 2001, out of the five of our family, two of us managed to escape. But I was to return to a home without parents. Mother returned from captivity heart broken and her chest grew weak from gun butting. She wasted away and died. Father remained on our trail until we crossed into Sudan. He trudged back home weakened and heart broken. He didn't live for long.

