

# Regional community peacebuilding and the LRA conflict

a conversation with John Baptist Odama,  
Archbishop of Gulu, Uganda

**The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) conflict has spread across national borders, from northern Uganda into southern Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Central African Republic (CAR).**

A number of traditional, religious and civic leaders from affected countries have responded by pooling their own resources across borders to promote peace. In March 2009 they formed a Regional Civil Society Task Force building on the long experience of northern Ugandan civil society in dealing with the LRA conflict to develop collective peacebuilding capacity. Through shared analysis and experiences, the Task Force advocates regional, non-violent responses and provides direct support to affected communities. It uses traditional peacebuilding mechanisms, like the *Mato oput* justice process in northern Uganda that helps to reconcile former LRA fighters and reintegrate them into their communities.

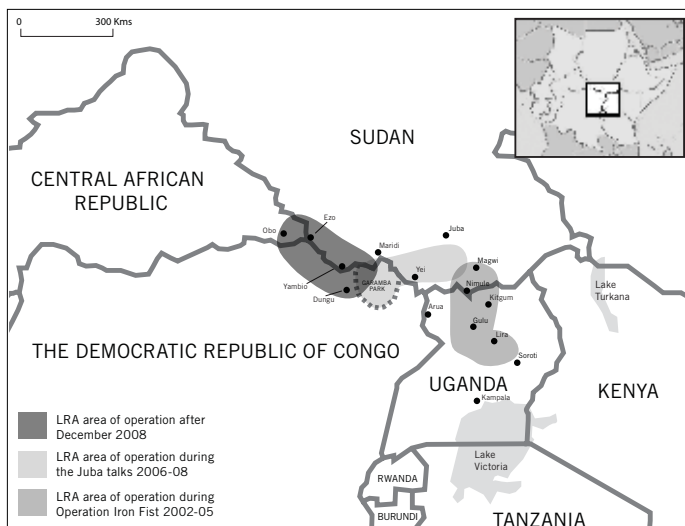
A prominent figure in northern Ugandan civil society, Archbishop Odama has been a leader of efforts to build peace with the LRA throughout the conflict, and he is a founding father of the Task Force. Below, the Archbishop reflects on his experiences. The Task Force faces huge challenges: developing relationships across great distances with limited resources and little infrastructure, and bridging multiple language barriers. Archbishop Odama illustrates how the Task Force's presence in LRA-affected areas, especially the most isolated, has helped fearful communities to talk about their problems and find ways to address them. Experiences from northern Uganda in supporting the return of abducted rebels to their communities has inspired and empowered newly affected communities.

The Task Force's strategy of encouraging rebels to return home aims to deplete LRA ranks, reduce risk and rebuild damaged communities.

The LRA insurgency against President Yoweri Museveni's government began in northern Uganda in 1986. Led by Joseph Kony, it fused Christian theology based on the Ten Commandments with elements of mysticism and local Acholi tradition. It was one of several resistance movements mounted against the government due to perceived political marginalisation. Lacking popular support, the LRA adopted brutal tactics against communities including murder, mutilation, abduction and sexual enslavement.

The LRA is especially notorious for the forced recruitment of child soldiers and the majority of LRA rebels are abductees. Government military operations have killed many LRA – but losses are replaced through further abductions. Following pressure from civil society, in 2000 the Ugandan government introduced an Amnesty Act to allow the return of rebels to their communities without prosecution. Thousands went back.

In 2005 the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued arrest warrants for Kony and four of his senior commanders. But a political settlement remains elusive. The only formal peace process between the Ugandan government and the LRA took place in Juba, southern Sudan from 2006 to 2008. A Final Peace Agreement was drawn up but Kony did not sign it. Some say the ICC arrest warrants influenced his decision. Nevertheless, elements of the agreement have been implemented, including introducing a Special Court in Uganda to try war crimes.



**Lord's Resistance Army areas of operation.**

Ugandan civic peacebuilding initiatives have been active since the beginning of the war. They have been instrumental in supporting dialogue between the Ugandan government and the LRA, and in informal processes of demobilisation, rebel return and local reconciliation. Local communities have provided 'anchors of resilience' to violence. Civil society dialogue with the LRA leadership prepared the ground for the Juba negotiations.

Since 2008 regional governments have focused on joint military offensives against the LRA, including Operation Lightning Thunder. Military responses have so far been inconclusive – if not counterproductive. They have driven the LRA out of Uganda, allowing for the resettlement of over 750,000 displaced Ugandans. But military operations have dispersed and escalated the conflict, and have prompted the LRA to violently recruit. People in neighbouring countries are now suffering, while the cross-border dynamics of the conflict have made it more complex and harder to resolve.

## Interview

### Regionalised LRA conflict dynamics and peacebuilding

#### ***What challenges does the LRA conflict pose for peacebuilders now that it is affecting communities in four countries?***

The LRA conflict is no longer a national issue. It has become 'multi-local' and nomadic. The area covered by the LRA now is much bigger, including south-west Sudan and parts of eastern DRC and CAR. As the conflict multiplies, it becomes more complex. People are not sure where it will move to.

#### ***What are the particular peacebuilding needs that you see?***

We need to build trust, unity and solidarity across the affected countries to say: "yes, we can address this confidently without fearing". This can't just come from Uganda. There is

also a great need for national and local support for victims. People in affected communities are not open about the LRA's presence. They feel insecure. If they say something, they wonder who will defend them if they are then assaulted. This makes it difficult – you're not sure where the LRA is. Other groups are also involved in local conflicts so you don't know which people are LRA and which are not.

#### ***How are you working to respond to the conflict?***

We came to the conclusion that we need to work with cultural, religious and civil society leaders, as well as our political representatives, from the affected countries. With the help of partners like Conciliation Resources (CR) and Pax Christi, we have created a Regional Civil Society Task Force to try to address the situation.

We have held five meetings so far – two in Gulu and then Kampala (Uganda), Sudan and Dungu (DRC) – to find the truth about where the LRA has moved to and how we can respond.

The meeting at Dungu was very 'hot'! Reconciling with the people of Congo and CAR and Uganda was challenging. At first they were hostile to us Ugandans, accusing us of having spread the war. We told them that we understand, we have suffered too, but that we should reconcile to build a better understanding of the conflict and work together to bring an end to it.

We poured what I call some 'water' or 'sand' on the situation: we went through their thoughts, the abductions, the things we have all gone through. We shared these stories without any laughter or shouting, talking honestly from the heart. We described our peaceful approach and advised that anything we do together, we do peacefully. They ended up accepting us. Staying together for four days, eating together and accompanying them on walks helped in this.

We then started working on categorical joint statements and what we need to do to promote the Task Force: issues that we can work on in our different countries, promoting peace and dialogue, building our skills.

#### ***What challenges have you faced?***

One challenge is that the distances are great. Logistics are difficult. Second, the other peacebuilding groups are not so well organised. Groups working for peace in Uganda are more advanced than the others, as the religious, traditional and cultural leaders here are used to working together. Third, financial difficulties: it is not easy to access resources. We are lucky that CR has supported us but we could do more. It's not easy to meet others to make our voice louder. We could do more on advocacy. These are the challenges we have.

“ Operation Lightning Thunder (2008-09) was like throwing stones at bees; the swarm of bees scattered and are now stinging people everywhere”

***What would you like to achieve through more advocacy?***

First, to promote dialogue and non-violent approaches. Second, leaders of the countries affected by the LRA war must come together to address the issue on a regional level. Third, to help unite the religious and cultural leaders regionally so they can mobilise people to raise a common voice, as we have done in northern Uganda. Also, we are broken into pieces by this war. We need reconciliation. On a national level in Uganda we are not yet reconciled – and even less so on a regional level.

**The impact of military responses to the war**

***What has been the effect of military operations deployed to end the war?***

The military response has made the war become nomadic. Military responses have always been destructive and do not solve anything. They multiply problems. We do not advocate them because of our experiences.

Operation Lightning Thunder (2008-09) was like throwing stones at bees; the swarm of bees scattered and are now stinging people everywhere. From Uganda to Sudan, from Sudan to Congo, from Congo to Central Africa. I'm not sure whether it will also go to another country. This is my fear.

We have advocated for a peaceful way of resolving this conflict. If you have a conflict at home, when brothers and sisters fight, you normally make them sit down and ask: “why are you fighting?” You don't say: “solve it by killing one another.” Once you've exterminated the child, you've exterminated the family. This is the fundamental problem with using force against an 'enemy' where many are themselves victims, having been abducted as children and forced to commit atrocities. These people need protection, not extermination.

For us in northern Uganda – taking the area of Lango, Acholi and West Nile – this war has lasted too long, and we wish to address it through dialogue. We urge the government to look into this. We say to the government: “you are like a father; you cannot fight with the aim of exterminating your child.” We say to the LRA: “the government is your father; you don't go fighting with your father to the point of exterminating him.”

So now the problem has spread, we are saying to the Congo (DRC), Sudan and CAR: “you're a brother to Uganda; we are all brothers. Why are you going to such lengths as exterminating one another to solve this problem? You must talk.”

Our approach is to mobilise elders whose influence will have an effect on the leaders – political, cultural and social – so they can put their voices together to address the parties who are at war with one another and bring them to the table.

***What have been the effects of violence on communities?***

I don't know how many lives have been lost as a consequence of the fighting. Nor are we sure of the definite financial cost of the military operation. But the money was invested in destruction, not construction. That money could have brought a big change to northern Uganda.

Also, abducting people from villages is a way of recruiting, for the LRA to cope with military attack. When they know there is no fight against them in the area, usually they will not abduct. The moment they think the population is against them or there is imminent attack from the armed forces, then you see them abducting to increase their numbers so they can fight effectively.

Suppose we said: “we don't want any of this fighting. If you want food we shall share ours with you, but please solve your problems.” This would help. Local people are ready to cooperate when they are safe. They are looking for a way out. Some abducted LRA fighters have been accepted back into communities in Congo, for example.

***How can international policymakers more effectively help you to resolve the LRA conflict?***

One idea would be: let them concentrate on the resettlement of the people, the reconstruction of the area and the work for development programmes at home. This is what would attract people to come back, when they see that activities for growth and production are going on and the environment in which they are living is less difficult. This will be more convincing than a military response. Military responses consume more money. If the money allocated for resettlement of the people is used for military operations, there will be nothing left.

**Dialogue with the LRA**

***Has the Task Force connected with national, regional or international peacebuilding processes?***

We have been advocating contact with the LRA. We did it in the past. We have had some face-to-face talks. The rebels knew that we are not people for their destruction so they were eager to talk.

During the Juba peace process (2006-08), the Vice President of southern Sudan and Chief Mediator of the peace talks, Riek Machar, gave us the opportunity to meet the LRA leader, Joseph Kony. We went to Garamba Park, where the rebels were encamped. We met Kony and convinced him to meet another bigger group. And he met them. That was a good confidence-building process. It allowed him later to come out to go to a gathering of peace negotiators with the help of Joaquim Chissano (Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General for LRA-Affected Areas during the Juba talks).

In December 2008, fourteen days before Operation Lightning Thunder was launched, around 20 religious, cultural and civil leaders went to meet Kony and his team. He exceptionally raised the issue of ICC with us as a reason for not coming out to sign the Final Peace Agreement. You see all these efforts to prepare the ground.

***With the new relationships formed through the Regional Civil Society Task Force, might you find a way of having this kind of dialogue with the LRA again?***

Where there is goodwill for dialogue, such efforts can yield fruit, just as at Juba. For two and a half years the LRA, the Government of Uganda and civil society could meet face-to-face, except for the top leaders. I'm confident that if regional leaders reduced the military approach and supported people with access to the LRA to move freely, something positive would come out of it.

### **Supporting communities**

***What can people do that governments cannot?***

One thing governments cannot do is to convince LRA fighters returning that they are accepted back and say: "we are ready to reconcile with you, you are still our children." The government can act officially through granting amnesty and so on. But if people from where the rebels were living, people who are suffering, say: "we are ready to welcome you back" – and when they see that they are not attacked, not rejected – they will come back. This is the power of civil society.

The rebels continuously heard about *Mato oput*, the Ugandan Acholi tribe's traditional justice system. Community chiefs mediate a ceremony involving acknowledgement of wrongdoing and the offering of compensation. They got to think: "yes, this is possible, let us go back home." Some of them came. They were received with a cultural ceremony of stepping on eggs which officially says: "you are welcome, you still have your place at home." You need to convince these people.



John Baptist Odama, Archbishop of Gulu, Uganda © James Latigo

***Have people in Congo, CAR and Sudan learnt from your way of dealing with returnees?***

Yes. We talked with people in Dungu in DRC, especially those in charge of justice and peace, and tried to advise them about how our efforts to reach out to individual combatants in northern Uganda worked to bring those people out of the bush. In the Congo, CAR and Southern Sudan, where community members have worked together, they have managed to woo them back. Not everyone accepts this approach though. When there is conflict, people are divided. They take sides and it becomes difficult.

***Is it true that the LRA are providing training in Luo (a language spoken in northern Uganda and southern Sudan) to maintain it as a common language? If so, might your colleagues in neighbouring countries need help with the Luo language too, so they could have dialogue with the LRA at a local level?***

Communicating with the abducted rebels in the right languages is a key issue. Many rebels do speak Luo. Somebody from Gulu (northern Uganda) was employed by the radio station run by MONUSCO (the UN Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the DRC) in Dungu to transmit messages to the LRA in Luo. However, local communities didn't understand the programmes. They feared they encouraged the LRA to come closer to the villages instead of telling them to go back to Uganda. So people held demonstrations against MONUSCO. Also, the rebels are no longer only Acholi. They are mixed now. Some speak languages from Congo and CAR, such as Lingala and Azande, and they learn each other's languages. A fundamental

question is how some rebels are able to live in an environment where they don't know the language. It may mean they have trust in the population around which they stay.

## Moving forward and sharing lessons

### ***How would you like to see the Regional Civil Society Task Force developing?***

We would like to see more meetings in the affected areas, like Yambo, south-west Sudan, and Congo and Central Africa. Dungu was very good as it was very close to where the LRA were residing. Some places might be far away, but it's worth going to them because when the local population hears that a group like this is coming and is interested in their issues, this resonates with them and helps give them hope.

### ***Communities in many other places face conflicts that cross borders. Do you have a message to share with others in similar situations to you?***

My first suggestion would be: advocacy for promotion of human dignity is fundamental. When you are a peace worker and you want others to take the same line – to respect human dignity, even in the enemy – it is important to sensitise him or her to

realise this. Then a person will begin to think twice before they take a more destructive course of action.

I say this from my experience in November 2008 when I went to visit Kony. My words to the rebel leader were: "Kony, your life, the lives of those that are in your hands in Uganda, Congo, Sudan, DRC, are very precious. We don't want to lose any of them. That's why we have come to you." He went quiet. But I think he took the point. I wish we had more time to talk with him about that.

Second, communication between human beings is also fundamental. It's through communication you come to understand, to know, to appreciate one another. The moment you can talk to one another, that is already a big achievement.

Third, convince those fuelling the conflict: don't stain your hands with blood. Don't promote yourselves by the blood of others. Respect and protect life. Promote the good of humanity.

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Interview conducted by Elizabeth Drew. Introduction section by Elizabeth Drew.

**Figure 2.** *Geography, trends and trajectories of the Lord's Resistance Army since 1997 (timeline and event frequency)*



Clionadh Raleigh, Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) [see page 16 for more on ACLED]

The above graph outlines LRA activity since 1997, with an emphasis on major points in the group's history. Rates of LRA violence seem to diverge in response to 'carrot' and 'stick' interventions. Government military operations against the LRA, including Operation Iron Fist in 2001 and Operation Lightning Thunder in 2008, prompted civilian massacres and large-scale abductions. By contrast, the LRA's lowest period of violent activity in the past 14 years correlates with its participation in the Juba Peace Process.