

# LRA / Government negotiations 1993-94

**Billie O'Kadameri**

Billie O'Kadameri participated in the 1993-94 peace talks as a journalist as well as Media, Political and Risk Analyst to Minister Betty Bigombe. He now works for the English Service of Radio France Internationale, Paris.

By the early 1990s, insurgencies in Lango and in Teso had largely ended but the war in Acholiland continued to intensify as the armed movement led by Joseph Kony consolidated its military capacity, with ever growing humanitarian and military costs. It became increasingly clear to the government that something needed to be done to end the conflict. The talks between representatives of Museveni's government and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) between November 1993 and February 1994 were perhaps the most significant initiative by the government to engage directly with the LRA in political negotiations to end the war. But negotiations collapsed abruptly before a final agreement could be reached. This article examines the period leading up to these talks, the course of the negotiations and the events around their collapse, as well as initiatives to resume talks later that year.

## **Military evolution of Kony's forces**

Joseph Kony established his group as a formidable military force in 1988. The new group was named the United Holy Salvation Army (UHSA) in an apparent attempt to distance it from the defunct Holy Spirit Mobile Force (HSMF), which had disbanded after Alice 'Lakwena' was defeated in November 1987. The speed of Lakwena's downfall, and the outright military defeat of the HSMF, reinforced confidence in the Ugandan army that any 'replay of the Holy Spirit war' would meet the same fate as the Lakwena rebellion. The emergence of Kony's force therefore did not worry the army initially.

Contrary to expectations, however, Kony's forces were strengthened following a combination of forced recruitment of the remnants of the UPDA rebels and Lakwena's lost rear forces, and daring attacks against the government troops in Gulu district in 1988-89. In late 1988, the NRA suffered a series of minor but militarily significant setbacks in rebel attacks. With news of such apparent rebel heroics, the population in Acholiland, many of whom were anti-Museveni, slowly began to believe that Kony was capable of causing trouble for the regime in Kampala.



## Government's response

As the armed conflict intensified in the north, the government responded by stepping up its military campaign to destroy the insurgency and by creating political infrastructure to coordinate a response to the crisis in the region. During a cabinet reshuffle in mid-1988, Museveni created a new ministerial post to address the rebellion in Acholi. He chose one of his Acholi confidantes, Betty Bigombe, as 'Minister of State for Pacification of Northern Uganda, Resident in Gulu'. But the controversial connotations of the term 'pacification' soon resulted in the revision of the title to 'Minister of State in Office of the Prime Minister, Resident in Northern Uganda'.

It seemed Bigombe was sent to Acholi not to negotiate peace, but to convince remnants of the insurgents to come out of the bush. For five years most of what she did was to encourage the locals to tell their sons to give up the rebellion. The decision to start talking peace was a personal one by Bigombe, not backed by any official policy to end the war through dialogue.

Bigombe developed a reputation as a grassroots mobiliser, determined to make her mark in the area in spite of the cultural prejudice she endured in her first years as Minister (a woman trying to end a war between men). By the time she began to plan for talks with the

LRA, she had established a reputation among ordinary Acholi as someone who could be trusted to handle the issue, although many Acholi remained sceptical about the overall intentions of the government.

Led by Col Peter Kerim, the NRA was meanwhile reshuffled to enable it to deal a decisive blow to the LRA. Although the military operations from mid-1989 weakened the LRA massively, Kerim was not able to secure the complete defeat desired by Museveni. Col Samuel Wasswa subsequently replaced Kerim as 4th Division Commander.

In 1990, Minister of State for Defence Maj. Gen. David Tinyefuza, who was the NRA's chief military combat strategist, was sent to northern Uganda to achieve a final military victory over Kony's forces. The military operations that began on 31 March 1991 later became known as 'Operation North'. During the operation there were reports of arbitrary arrests and detentions and blanket cordon and search operations intended to net the so-called 'rebel collaborators', which in the end generated resentment against the army and the government. Tinyefuza was recalled by President Museveni and subsequently dismissed in 1992.

By 1992 Kony's group had been renamed the United Democratic Christian Movement/Army (UDCM/A) – later to become the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). The UDCA

had, in the NRA's words, been reduced 'to hundreds instead of thousands'. Nevertheless, a sizeable contingent and a core of the leadership survived and occasionally attacked both civilian and military targets, especially in Gulu, including the abductions of 44 girls from Sacred Heart Secondary School and St. Mary's Girls School, both near Gulu. It was evident that the government knew that although Kony's armed movement had been weakened, it was still capable of causing trouble

In response, in 1992 Bigombe initiated village-based self-defence vigilante outfits known as 'Arrow Groups', a loose assortment of male villagers without central command, through which locals were supposed to protect themselves against attacks by rebels. Bigombe and the local government functionaries argued that if the UDCA fighters were poorly armed, which was partly true, then local people should not allow themselves to be taken captive or killed. In response, rebels targeted villagers in brutal reprisals.

The rebels had killed civilians suspected of government cooperation in the past, but the targeted killings of a more brutal nature became increasingly prominent immediately after the end of 'Operation North'. The attacks on civilians, though a direct reaction to the creation of the 'Arrow Groups', were not intended merely to eliminate government supporters among the villagers. They also appear to have been a regimented attempt at winning support by instilling fear of revenge if people did not cooperate with the rebels.

## Initiating contact

Bigombe was having tea with Col Wasswa one evening in June 1993 when discussion turned to the rebellion. She asked Wasswa for documents captured from the rebels indicating their collaborators in Gulu. The next day Wasswa sent her hundreds of exercise books obtained from Kony's fighters over a five-year period. Leafing through these documents, she identified a couple of key people mentioned repeatedly. One was based in Kitgum and the other, Yusuf Okwonga Adek, was based in Gulu. Bigombe sought more information on Adek and learned that he was one of Kony's most trusted friends and advisors. Adek had been detained previously at Luzira prison on charges of collaborating with rebels but was released and returned to his home near Gulu town.

At this initial stage, Bigombe did not tell the army that she intended to make contact with Kony's group. She invited Adek to a discreet meeting where they discussed the origins of the rebellion and the reasons why it continued. She asked Adek's view on how to bring it to an end without spilling more blood. Adek was enthusiastic and they held three more meetings that week. It gave Bigombe an opportunity to learn more about the enigmatic Joseph Kony – of whom little was known even to government officials detailed to fight and defeat him.

Bigombe assured Adek that the government wanted to talk to Kony and asked if he could act as the intermediary. Adek was told he could travel through the bush to reach Kony's camp without fear of being held or harmed by the NRA. Bigombe wrote a letter to Kony, for delivery by Adek. After a week, he returned with a letter from Kony acknowledging receipt of Bigombe's letter and indicating that he needed 'to receive guidance from the Holy Spirit' and would respond if Adek returned in three weeks.

Previous efforts by various leaders to initiate contact with the insurgents had generally ended in failure. Intermediaries claiming to have close contacts were usually frauds who demanded goods such as money, bicycles, or the return of cows, in return for letters purportedly written by rebel commanders – most of them fake. The letters that Adek brought from the bush therefore came under close scrutiny, but were found to be genuine. Bigombe believed that Adek was honest, and he never asked for more funds than he would need for the job and sometimes never asked for anything at all, arguing that nobody needed money to buy anything in the jungle.

## Engaging the NRA in the process

By the time Bigombe initiated contact with Joseph Kony, she had not informed even the President that such a process was underway. It is not certain whether Division Commander Col Wasswa had informed the head of state either. Knowing she had found solid ground, Bigombe consulted with Museveni, who encouraged her to proceed but to liaise with the army to avoid uncoordinated movements. When she consulted key figures in the army, some were cautiously enthusiastic, while others wanted her to 'negotiate the surrender of the rebels'. She argued her case by promising that a negotiated peace was more cost-effective than a military one.

Col Wasswa, whose support remained constant throughout the process, in turn briefed Brigadier Joram Mugume, NRA Chief of Combat Operations and Lt Col Fred Toolit, Director of Military Intelligence. They told him that Bigombe could continue her initiative without compromising army operations, which would continue as though no contacts were being made and would, in fact, be intensified to further weaken the rebels.

Again, Bigombe did not seem discouraged and went on with the initiative convinced it would take a tangible result for some of the army chiefs to recognise the virtues of the initiative. She also knew the President would rein in the commanders when the hour of reckoning came. She did not, however, make these 'internal contradictions' known to the LRA, fearing the rebels might abandon the process if they got the slightest hint that the government side was not acting in unison. Contrary to popular belief, Bigombe believed, and said so, that the President

encouraged the initiative, although he did not openly support the initiative in order not to appear to have 'failed in defeating the rebels'.

It is clear that supporting the process would give the President two important advantages. If he allowed the initiative to continue, its limitations notwithstanding, and if it succeeded, he would quieten those who had always accused him of being militaristic and of never exploring peaceful solutions to conflicts. If the talks failed, he could still parade the initiative as an example of his government's attempts at ending the war peacefully 'which was derailed by the bandits who never knew what they wanted except to continue killing people'.

## Pre-negotiations and confidence-building

By October 1993, the two sides were discussing the modalities and security arrangements for the first meeting. Courting the unknown, Bigombe was willing at this stage to comply with the demands made by Kony's group to begin face-to-face negotiations.

Security arrangements for the talks proved difficult, but were central to confidence-building. The army was extremely nervous about the risks. In 1987, while on a peace mission in Teso, three government ministers were abducted and held by Teso insurgents and one minister was killed in the crossfire when the army mounted a rescue operation. The army did not want Bigombe to meet a similar fate and refused to allow her to go unarmed. This issue delayed the setting of the meeting date for days. The LRA eventually yielded, indicating that they would trust Bigombe and 'her soldiers' to maintain security but that Bigombe would be held responsible if anything untoward happened. An intermediary further informed Bigombe that he was not sure whether Kony would attend the first meeting or even whether any of his senior commanders would attend. A meeting was set nonetheless.

During this period, Kony attended a funeral held close to the army barracks and spent the night nearby. Apparently, Kony had the impression the army knew of his presence but did not attack because talks were being organised. This contributed significantly to his confidence in the process.

## The first Pagik meeting

The first face-to-face negotiations between the LRA and government representatives took place on 25 November 1993 at Pagik, in the Aswa region of Gulu. In addition to her army bodyguards, Bigombe was accompanied, at the LRA's suggestion, by several elders, including Yusuf Adek, as well as the author who was responsible for recording the proceedings. The NRA's Wasswa, Toolit and their aides also accompanied Bigombe. Upon arrival Bigombe

seemed taken aback that only middle-ranking officers of the LRA were sent for such a historic contact. The delegation was selected apparently as a snub to the army's insistence on guarding the event, but they brought with them a tape-recorded message from Kony.

The LRA opened the proceedings with prayers led by their 'Director of Religious Affairs' Jenaro Bongomin. He indicated that Kony sent their delegation in response to the letters exchanged with Bigombe. Bigombe said that she had initiated the peace talks because of the suffering and insecurity experienced by Acholi as a result of the war. She pointed out that economic and social development would be blocked unless the war ended. The LRA team noted that they saw this first get-together as a contact meeting; if it went well proper talks for discussing the modalities for peace would follow. An LRA Commander, Cirilo Jurukadri Odego, insisted that if the talks were to succeed, then 'old wounds should not be re-opened' and that the LRA 'should not be publicly blamed for what occurred in the past because what is happening now marks a new beginning'. They declared they had come to the talks in good faith and would therefore not present any conditions to the government. They nevertheless had a number of requests.

They asked for the past to be forgotten and a general amnesty given to all the fighters. They insisted that the LRA should not be seen as a defeated force but as people who had responded positively to the peace initiative because the LRA itself wanted peace. They asserted that they were not 'surrendering' but 'returning home', and they did not want to be referred to as 'rebels' but as 'people'. The delegation described why they had begun their struggle, that they were fighting those who had rejected the way of God and therefore had to struggle against both the NRA and UPDA fighters. They further claimed the UPDA surrendered to the NRA in 1988 in order to return to battle against the LRA from a point of advantage and to avenge their earlier defeats. They insisted the negotiations should therefore exclude former UPDA officials.

Furthermore, they asked the NRA to cease hostilities in order to allow the LRA to organise their men for 'return'. They noted that the ceasefire they had requested the previous month by letter to Bigombe and Wasswa had been granted. They now wanted the government to formalise it. The LRA also wanted the opportunity to bring in their fighters from elsewhere, 'including from Kenya and Europe'. Referring to the earlier experience of UPDA demobilisation, they claimed that if these 'scattered' fighters were ignored then fighting would continue again at sometime in the future. 'If you don't allow us to bring out all our men, it means you want us to come and turn around fighting our own brothers in another war', said Jenaro Bongomin. They also demanded that the government treat their sick and wounded in

government hospitals under the supervision of government and LRA officers. In return, they indicated their desire to open clinics in Acholi to treat diseases like AIDS, for which they claimed to have a cure. Because of the blood shed between LRA and NRA fighters, they recommended a formal traditional ritual performed by selected Acholi elders. Such a ritual could then 'formally mark a reunion between brothers who were once enemies'. They issued assurances that Kony himself, without whom no binding decision could be made in the LRA, would attend the next meeting.

In response to these requests, Bigombe promised the LRA delegation that the existing general amnesty and presidential pardon would cover them. She assured the delegation that no one in this war could be categorised as either victor or vanquished. Emphasizing that 'the government is very sincere in its attempts to have you back home' she agreed that the past should be forgiven. She asked the LRA to establish the exact number of their sick and injured so treatment in government hospitals could be arranged. She also agreed not to bring former UPDA members to the talks.

Bigombe further indicated that although they understood that the LRA would need time to reorganise themselves for a formal return, the process should occur within a set time frame and as quickly as possible. Wasswa said the NRA on its part would order its troops to avoid operations against the LRA, who would be given an area in which to freely operate and regroup. Interestingly, both the LRA and NRA negotiators expressed their concern that a 'third force' might try to sabotage these arrangements in order to wreck the process, and they both agreed on the need to be vigilant to prevent this.

The day-long proceedings agreed on the arrangements for the next meeting and allowed LRA commanders to present their case and explain their cause. Bigombe did the majority of the talking, but Wasswa and Toolit also participated. Although intended as a confidence-building contact, the meeting turned into a negotiation session with the exchange of demands and offers. The tone was cordial and, by the end, all agreed they had gone far and paved the way for the next, bigger meeting that would include Kony. Confidence had been established to the point where the LRA was later able to send their representatives to the NRA's Gulu barracks, where Bigombe lived, to discuss the progress of the talks.

Bigombe's team initially felt that the absence of Kony and most of his senior commanders at the first talks was a snub. They were later told that 'the ear, the soul and one of the brains behind Kony's movement' was Jenaro Bongomin, who had led the prayers. He was the only person present when 'the Holy Spirit descended' upon Kony in 1987 and was among Kony's closest confidantes. Other participants were also key figures. Jackson Achama

served as a Kony's personal secretary, Yardin Tolbert Nyeko – later to become one of the highest-ranking LRA officers – his close aide, as was Cirilo Jurukadri Odego, a former UPDA officer from West Nile.

## Government caution

In the weeks after the Pagik meeting the NRA became increasingly interested in the talks. It soon became apparent that Col Wasswa – who had gone out of his way to use his budget to fund the peace process and to buy clothes, food and medicine for the LRA – was under considerable pressure. Brigadier Mugume and Lt Col Toolit indicated their concern that Bigombe had 'caved in too much' to LRA demands. Bigombe was also under political pressure. Her immediate boss, Prime Minister George Cosmas Adyebo, refused to give her the logistical and even public political support necessary to conduct the peace process. This may have been due to political differences, exacerbated by concerns over who would receive recognition for resolving the conflict in northern Uganda and over who was the pre-eminent politician of the north.

Bigombe was also under pressure not to over-publicise the progress made in the talks. There seemed to be some apprehension in government circles that over-publicising the talks would generate too much public expectation, and that if anything went wrong the government would be held responsible. Nevertheless, expectations grew among local people. They could see a marked change in the behaviour of the LRA and therefore supported the talks.

It is imperative to note the ad hoc nature of this process. At no time were the top army leadership including the President, willing to tell Bigombe unambiguously that she was doing the right thing and had their full support. It was clear that the army believed the President supported the initiative as he had not come out against it, but he had not clearly directed the army on what to do, how to cooperate and to what level. The lack of substantive political directive and guidance from President Museveni at this point left open to speculation his own motives regarding the process.

## Stand-off over security

Three days prior to the scheduled meeting between Bigombe and the LRA 'top' leadership, a meeting was held with senior Acholi politicians and elders, among them former Ugandan Head of State General Tito Okello Lutwa and former Prime Minister and UPDM leader Eric Otema-Allimadi. Two LRA commanders also participated but were verbally attacked by Tito Okello, who condemned their atrocities against Acholi. Allimadi did not say much at this meeting although he was quoted as having spoken elsewhere condemning the rebels.





**LRA commanders and soldiers performing battle ritual**

*Source: Billie O'Kadameri*

The LRA had expressed their wish to talk to the religious leaders in Acholiland, who were subsequently invited to attend the meeting between the government and the LRA. Anglican and Muslim leadership were willing to participate, with Rev. Macleod Baker Ochola and Sheikh Ochaya chosen to represent their respective faiths. Local Catholic authorities were, however, unwilling to send a representative. Why the Catholic Church took this stand remains unclear, but it was perhaps linked to the initial months of the UPDA rebellion when a senior Italian Catholic priest was accused by the security forces of aiding the rebels and was then deported. Another Catholic priest, the Canadian Fr Paul Donohue, based in Kitgum, was almost deported during 'Operation North' for similar reasons. On the other hand, the Catholic Church had also lost some of its priests at the hands of the LRA – including Fr Egidio Biscaro, who was killed at Pajule, and Cyril Obol, killed on the Gulu-Kitgum road – and therefore seemed hostile to the rebel group as well. Following this rejection the LRA became increasingly hostile to both the Gulu Catholic Church and the former political leaders.

On 10 January 1994, the negotiators met again in Pagik. But unresolved questions about security arrangements for the talks nearly caused them to collapse. The LRA had indicated that they wanted to be solely responsible for the maintenance of security at the second meeting; the NRA remained unwilling to accept this arrangement. When Bigombe's delegation of elders, religious and women's leaders, and army officials accompanied by soldiers arrived seven kilometres from the agreed venue, they were met by approximately one hundred members of the LRA. They refused to allow the NRA soldiers to

police the venue. Thus the first negotiation task was to find a solution to this stand-off. Yusuf Adek and the author became intermediaries, making almost a dozen journeys between the LRA and NRA commanders. The LRA maintained that they had acted in good faith during the first meeting and allowed the government to provide security for the venue. On this occasion they wanted to be responsible for the security so that only one side would be blamed if problems occurred. As night-time drew near, Bigombe began to fear a great opportunity would be missed. Bigombe made direct contact with Kony by field radio, who reiterated that the talks would be postponed unless the negotiators came to the venue without armed escorts. She decided to go unprotected and asked Wasswa and Toolit if they were willing to do the same. They in turn requested permission from Brigadier Mugume by radio and, when it was refused, declined to go but sent their aides to accompany her.

They left for the venue at about 1800 hours. The team was searched thoroughly by the LRA guards to see 'if they were carrying charms'. They were then sprayed with 'holy water' to cleanse them before entering the venue. Over the next hour, LRA commanders arrived one-by-one, while a choir entertained the delegates with 'Holy Spirit' songs. When it was almost dark, the commanders welcomed Bigombe's team and expressed disappointment over the army officers' absence. However, because night had arrived, the LRA said the talks could not begin and that everyone should spend the night at the venue and talks would start the next morning. Bigombe thanked the LRA delegation, although she complained that people had been mistreated on the way to the venue, and explained that the delegation

could not spend the night at the venue as the President was waiting to hear from her. If they did not return that night, it would be misunderstood.

After consulting Kony, who was in a house barely metres away, the LRA agreed for the entire team to go to Gulu and return the next morning. To prove their sincerity, they gave Bigombe thirty of their members as 'armed escorts' to take the minister back to Gulu. 'Let them guard you, because we do not want anything to happen to you and then we are blamed, because there are many people who are not pleased at what we are doing,' said LRA Field Commander George Omona. Returning to Gulu at night, the roads were lined with curious villagers, who sang and ululated as the delegation passed.

## Bigombe and Kony meet

When the team returned to Pagik the next day, they found the LRA's stringent measures had been removed and the environment was friendlier. When Kony arrived, it was apparent that he wanted to use this first meeting to tell the government, and especially the Acholi people, why he 'went to the bush'. In a four-hour speech, he held the Acholi community largely 'responsible for the war that had backfired with terrible results that everyone now blamed Kony for'. It also became clear why the LRA had insisted that Acholi elders participate in the talks. He claimed that Acholi elders sent them out and then abandoned them, forcing the LRA to turn their guns on their own people. Kony blamed them for Acholi's suffering and said that there were only three elders whom he could trust; the others were bloodthirsty people who had failed to guide the people in Acholi in its most serious hour of need. The LRA wanted to be seen as serious partners in the peace process and had begun to punish their troops who had committed atrocities in the villages.

Bigombe and Kony entered a one-to-one meeting. Kony informed Bigombe that he wanted to come out of the bush with all his fighters. He appealed to the government to enable the process to work and said he would not issue conditions to the government 'because the children in the bush are not my children but Acholi children,' and the Acholi community should appeal to the government for the future development of their children. Kony then restated his request for more time to regroup his troops. He claimed that if the government really wanted peace, it should be willing to wait for just six months.

## LRA/NRA relations deteriorate

The period following the second Pagik meeting was the first time since 1986 that almost the entire district felt secure. LRA fighters moved freely in the villages, entered army detachments and sat and sometimes ate with government soldiers. A third meeting soon followed at

Lakwatimer Primary School on 24 January 1994. The meetings were cordial and were attended by all the senior LRA commanders except Kony, and by the NRA's Col Wasswa and Lt Col Toolit. The involvement of NRA officers was crucial because the focus was now on negotiating ceasefire arrangements as well as other aspects of the peace agreement in which the army would have to be directly involved. A follow-up meeting was held to work out the details. Bigombe participated in all these meetings.

Problems started to emerge as preparations got underway for a meeting between Kony, Bigombe and possibly President Museveni to reach a comprehensive settlement. The LRA delegation believed that the NRA was behaving arrogantly. On numerous occasions, the talks were almost abandoned because the LRA interpreted Col Toolit's remarks as belittling.

For their part, the NRA negotiators did not see the talks moving in the expected direction. At one of the meetings in Bigombe's house, Brigadier Mugume told LRA commander Otti-Lagony that he, 'thought you had come here to negotiate your surrender'. The LRA team felt humiliated by this and other remarks. Bigombe became increasingly uncomfortable with the way the NRA officers were handling the talks. Yet the LRA exacerbated the tensions by, for example, demanding uniforms 'since we are almost one now', which led to the question 'if you are negotiating a peace deal to come out of the bush, why do you need uniforms?'

Notwithstanding these misgivings, a larger meeting was organised at Tegot-Atto on 2 February 1994. At this meeting, Col Toolit almost went to blows with LRA Commanders Sunday Arop and George Omona. Arop was so furious that he threatened to harm elder Anania Akera, claiming that Akera was one of those who 'pointed his penis towards the bush and cursed us' – traditionally the ultimate curse that a father can perform against his offspring. Despite these tensions a ceasefire document was drafted and signed between Omona and Wasswa.

Bigombe was in a difficult position, trying both to facilitate a process and act as a representative of the government. Her position was further complicated by the fact that she could not make some of the crucial on-the-spot decisions without consulting the army. In private conversations Bigombe hinted that there were attempts at every stage to sabotage the talks from various quarters, including from her colleagues in the government.

## The collapse

After the meeting, the LRA informed Bigombe that they would not send their officers to Gulu town again for meetings, as they believed there was a plot to arrest

them. Until the army clarified the situation, no meetings would occur. Even if no such plot existed, the behaviour of the government side had reinforced this perception and gave the LRA the perfect excuse to claim the threat was real. A follow-up meeting that was to take place on the Gulu-Kitgum border two weeks after the Tegot-Atto meeting was also postponed indefinitely. The army retorted by claiming the LRA had made contact with the Sudanese government and were now unwilling to continue with the talks. Curiously, the army officers did not inform Bigombe of this new development. She continued to send messages to the LRA, who explained they were willing to restart the talks but needed the army's reassurance they were up to no 'dirty tricks'.

On 6 February 1994, Museveni visited Gulu to attend the first anniversary of the visit by Pope John Paul II to the district. While addressing the crowd at Kaunda Ground, the President said that Bigombe had begun talks with the LRA to restore peace, but that the LRA had taken advantage of the talks to perpetuate 'banditry' and killing of the people. He announced that the LRA had seven days to surrender, otherwise the government would defeat them militarily.

The LRA did not take him up on this ultimatum. Two weeks later, it was reported the first group of LRA fighters had crossed the border and established bases in southern Sudan introducing a new dimension to the conflict. After a brief period of calm in Gulu and Kitgum, LRA troops returned with more sophisticated weapons including landmines. To some, their actions appeared to validate the army's earlier claims. Others blamed the President for scuttling the process. Either way, prospects for a peaceful settlement disappeared.

## Elders' attempts at restarting talks

Bigombe did not give up. She continued to maintain contact with the LRA, hoping the process could be revived. While the LRA was willing to maintain contact with Bigombe, they were stronger after acquiring weapons from Sudan and refused to resume the talks in practice. Col Wasswa was removed from his Gulu post and Brigadier Chefe Ali, credited with ending the war in Teso, was brought to Gulu. Major General Salim Saleh was later sent to Gulu as Senior Presidential Advisor on Military Affairs in northern Uganda. The government's strategy was now to end the war as quickly as possible by military means. For two years there were no apparent attempts at talks between the LRA and the government.

On 10 March 1996, the Rwot Achana led a delegation of forty people, twenty rwodi (hereditary chiefs) and twenty elders to meet President Museveni at his home in western Uganda asking that he accept 'that we continue to talk to them (i.e. the LRA) for peace.' LRA Lt Col Vincent

Bebabeba Oola, alias Otingting, returned to Uganda in April 1996 and began addressing civilians throughout Aswa and Kilak counties, claiming the LRA wanted good relations with them. Two Gulu elders – Mzee Okot-Ogoni, whose niece Lucy Oringa was one of Kony's favourite 'wives', and Mzee Rwot Olanya-Lagony, brother to LRA Commander Otti-Lagony – arranged meetings with Bebabeba. They later contacted Salim Saleh indicating that they could restart peace talks with the LRA if Saleh was willing to support it. Their first estimates of costs were approximately eight million Uganda shillings (US\$8,000). The government encouraged them to submit an increased budget of 153 million shillings (US\$150,000). This was leaked to the national media with the headline 'Elders Demand UGshilling 153 Million'. The elders then made arrangements for ten of them to meet Bebabeba in June 1996.

Kony had previously indicated that Bebabeba could continue meeting the elders if he felt their efforts were serious, but warned that it might be a ruse by the government. A week after the elders' meeting with Saleh, the army captured Bebabeba's signaller. He revealed that Bebabeba had received orders from Otti-Lagony in Sudan that the elders were government decoys and should be killed. Saleh sent Brigadier Chefe Ali personally to the home of the Rwot Achana to tell the delegation not travel to the bush because the LRA planned to harm the elders. Achana informed the other elders, who claimed this information was a trick by Bigombe to sabotage their efforts because her own attempts had failed in 1994.

Okot-Ogoni and Olanya-Lagony travelled incognito for their rendezvous with Bebabeba. They were met at Ogoni's home by the same LRA troops that always came to collect them. They told the family they had come to take the elders to their commander. Barely metres away, the elders were shot dead. Escapees from Sudan later said Otti-Lagony had been furious that his brother was killed, but eventually accepted it as a freak order that backfired. Lagony apparently knew the orders were given but never knew his own brother would be among the elders travelling that day. Two and half months later, General Saleh's commandos killed Bebabeba at Koch-Goma.

Bigombe left Gulu in June 1996, after being defeated in the parliamentary elections where she claimed Saleh sponsored her opponent. Although there were a few subsequent attempts between Otti-Lagony and Saleh to maintain contacts between the LRA and the government, including an exchange of letters on possible peace talks, these initiatives did not progress. Thus the peace efforts started in 1993 died in 1994. It remains to be seen whether subsequent efforts will succeed.