

the Ugandan government and LRA. Numerous trips were made by delegations, including the ARLPI, to Kony's new bases in the Garamba forest in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), to communicate mutual concerns and positions. These were viewed as instrumental in persuading the LRA leadership to pursue the peace talks that began in Juba, southern Sudan, in 2006 and which would last for nearly two years.

ARLPI members were invited to the Juba talks as observers. On several occasions during the negotiations, both the LRA and government negotiation team reverted to ARLPI members to clarify certain issues pertaining to the negotiating agenda. The ARLPI also played a key role in keeping communities informed, thereby encouraging public support for the peace process.

Five agreements were signed in Juba covering justice and accountability and demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration. But Kony failed to show up twice to sign the Final Peace Agreement, citing dissatisfaction with the handling of reintegration and the welfare of his troops, and the refusal of the International Criminal Court (ICC) to withdraw arrest warrants. The UPDF and US military concluded that the LRA had been using the period of talks to regroup, and in December 2008 Operation Lightening Thunder was launched against LRA bases in Garamba forest, dashing further hopes for a peaceful resolution.

Since Juba, the ARLPI has remained a viable channel for communication with the LRA. In an environment where conflict parties have favoured military options, and regional and international influence have been weighty, the ARLPI's ability to move between armed groups, communities and national and international actors has been important.

Since 2008 there have been three calls from purported LRA representatives seeking to revitalise talks, but there has remained a persistent lack of credible contact. LRA operations

and bases are now scattered between Western Equatoria in South Sudan, the DRC, the Central African Republic (CAR) and the volatile Darfur region of Sudan. The possibility that the Ugandan government has modern monitoring technology supplied by US advisers has probably made the group wary of using communications devices.

The ARLPI, together with sister churches and traditional organisations in Uganda, South Sudan, DRC and CAR, have formed a Regional Taskforce on the LRA, supported by international NGOs [see Regional community peacebuilding: a conversation with John Baptist Odama, *in* Accord 22, 2011]. This meets regularly to review the LRA situation and continues to seek contact and the possible resumption of peace talks.

Conclusion

The ARLPI has faced many challenges in its attempts to dialogue with the LRA and promote peace within the community and more broadly. It has encountered suspicion from opposing sides and operated in often volatile conditions. Communities are divided and sometimes resistant to the peace efforts.

A large part of the ARLPI's work has involved supporting traditional Acholi reconciliation processes (*Mato Oput*), preparing the community to receive former combatants, and promoting the Amnesty Law through translating and distributing Luo versions. This has involved overcoming differences in opinion and denomination within the ARLPI, and in-depth and heated discussion on issues of accountability, including the role of the ICC and of traditional justice mechanisms such as truth-telling processes and reparations. While outreach to the LRA has had varied results, perhaps the most significant part of ARLPI's work has been in strengthening community resilience and unity in the face of extreme violence, and building people's confidence and willingness to support peacebuilding activities.

BOX 2

Conversation with former LRA Commander Captain Ray Apire

Captain Ray Apire was abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in 1993 from his home village of Lamola in Kitgum district, northern Uganda. He served as the LRA's Chief Catechist (faith teacher) until he surrendered to the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) in 2004. Since then he has counselled new LRA returnees at the UPDF Child Protection Unit in Gulu.

In this interview, Captain Apire reflects on how the Acholi Religious Leaders' Peace Initiative (ARLPI) was perceived by the LRA. The interview was conducted by James Latigo in Acholi and translated into English.

Why do you think the LRA was willing to talk to ARLPI representatives?

The LRA does not trust anybody. That is why it has survived for so long. When I say LRA, I mean Joseph Kony. He gave the orders and decided for us, although he would often say it is the "spirit" in him talking. For example, when he decided to convene a general parade he would tell us that the spirit had directed him to do so.

We did not know the ARLPI as an organisation. But we knew certain members who were prominent religious leaders. Kony was an altar boy himself when he was younger. He had a respect for religious priests, especially Catholic ones. When operations and ambushes took place he ordered fighters to avoid disturbing the priests.

Why was that?

We heard that he wanted to become a priest himself. I think that is why he allowed Vincent Otti, his second in command, to call Archbishop Odama [a member of ARLPI]. Kony is a very intelligent man. He would say that the spirit forbids him to talk, and he would get his senior commanders like Otti and later Sam Kolo to speak on his behalf. When Kony does decide to speak, he talks like a machine gun – tatatatata – without being interrupted.

So what happened after the call by Vincent Otti to Archbishop Odama?

I was not very involved in operations, but I overheard a conversation about dropping a letter to the Archbishop's residence. That was how they gave directions and instructions [to the ARLPI] on where to meet. Because of a lack of trust, Kony did not want the religious leaders to be accompanied by the army. They kept changing the location to confuse the army.

His representatives secretly met with the religious leaders. I don't know who was there [from the LRA] apart from Otti, but they said that a message should be sent to the government that they wanted genuine talks. Numerous secret communications continued in this way. The rank-and-file members of the LRA were not informed of this – I think to keep them loyal. Kony instilled a lot of fear in those who were captured. He also made people believe it was the spirit guiding his thinking and planning.

In subsequent meetings, the religious leaders did not go alone but were accompanied by other community members. Did the LRA trust the community leaders?

Not at all. Kony used to say the Acholi community is like *dogiryo* – a two-headed snake that changes direction at its convenience. They will speak to you nicely and then say something different to the government. Out of respect for the religious leaders, those who accompanied them were tolerated. In 1996, two community elders, Samson Okot-Ogoni and chief Olanya-Lagony [who tried to broker peace between the LRA and the government], were killed. The LRA felt that everyone disliked them so it became very difficult to trust anybody.

In its *riyo tal* [mediation] role, the ARLPI communicated the community's concerns to the LRA – that it should stop abducting innocent children and end the conflict that was causing a lot of suffering to the people. How did the LRA react to this?

When that request was relayed to Kony he consulted his close commanders. Kony consults a lot but makes his own decisions. He claims that he is being guided by the "spirit" so no one can question it. Kony called Mega FM [a radio station based in Gulu, which broadcasts a number of peace programmes] to discuss the abduction of children and the suffering of the people. He said that people were aware of the ongoing war between the LRA and Government of Uganda, and if they put themselves in harm's way the LRA was not responsible. He said that government soldiers were doing most of the killing and then blaming the LRA. On the question of abduction, he said that the Acholi people were infected with evil and it was his responsibility to start a new, clean tribe.

Did the LRA agree it should talk to the government? How was it convinced?

The LRA had all along wanted to talk peace with the government. Even when it was fighting, it said it was fighting for peace. The LRA's argument was that the government did not want peace.

Did you notice any change in the LRA's behaviour or activities after its interactions with ARLPI?

The possibility of talking peace raised morale in the camps. I think many of them [LRA combatants] were becoming tired of fighting, and increasingly unconvinced by the promise that the government would be overthrown. But they were afraid to express their true wishes; they feared that Kony had the power to know when he was being discussed. It was serious psychological torture on the combatants.

Did the ARLPI initiative have any bearing on the Juba peace talks?

Juba was another matter. After the UPDF Operation Iron Fist [2002–05] Kony seized on an opportunity for Riek Machar [a Sudanese politician] to contact the Government of Uganda and mediate negotiations with the LRA. The ARLPI had sowed the seeds for peace talks and the LRA built on this. Juba was a very intricate "football match". There were a lot of organisations around Juba at that time and I cannot say much about the role of ARLPI in the actual talks.

Did the LRA leadership want to continue dialogue after the breakdown of the Juba talks?

The bombing of the LRA's main base in Garamba forest convinced them, in my opinion, that the government was not sincere about talks. That is why there is complete silence now. You need to talk from a position of strength. I think the LRA is not as strong as it was during the Juba talks. Perhaps in the future, if it gains strength, it will want to talk again. Many other people have entered the conflict in Garamba – the Americans, the armies of the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan. I am told that the African Union has also joined and that the UPDF is still chasing the LRA. Which side should be involved in talks with the LRA, or will they all be brought together?

Finally, do you think the ARLPI can still play a role in terms of dialogue with the LRA?

Personally, I think peace talks can still work. It would be good if someone could find a way to contact the LRA top leadership. But it is very difficult to know what is happening now in the organisation of the LRA. If they are in disarray as reported, then it will be difficult to organise talks again.

The reasons Kony gave for not signing the Juba Agreement need to be considered as well. This [lack of trust] was made worse by Operation Lightning Thunder [2008–09]. Who can he trust, especially with so many forces after him now? It may be a good idea if the ARLPI can find a way to reach him. Perhaps he will still trust them like he did in the beginning. But as I said, it is very difficult to know what is really going on within the LRA.