

Learning from past experiences to inform future efforts: the conflict in northern Uganda

May 2002

Conciliation Resources in association with the Centre of African Studies, University of London, and Kacoke Madit (London) organised a seminar around the publication 'Protracted conflict, elusive peace: initiatives to end the violence in northern Uganda', the eleventh issue in the series Accord: an international review of peace initiatives, on 7 May 2002 at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London.

In March the Ugandan government launched Operation Iron Fist, a military operation into southern Sudan in pursuit of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), following authorization from the Sudanese government. Aimed at engaging the LRA and undermining their base in southern Sudan, the operation has heightened tension in northern Uganda, where the conflict involving the LRA and the Ugandan government has spanned sixteen years. In the current climate, where dialogue and negotiated settlement has been indefinitely put aside by the primary parties to the conflict, looking back at previous peace initiatives and past challenges to inform future strategies for peace is particularly important. Fears that a military solution will be neither successful nor sustainable are widespread and negotiations will eventually have to take place.

The seminar offered an opportunity for UK policy makers and humanitarian professionals, the Ugandan diaspora in London, and others with an interest in the issue to discuss the current situation in northern Uganda and the options for peace drawing on lessons from past initiatives.

A panel of expert speakers addressed the seminar on lessons learned and challenges for the future. Uganda High Commissioner Professor George Kirya, Conflict Management adviser for Sub-Saharan Africa at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Tom Porteous, and Celia McKeon of Conciliation Resources, were joined on the panel by publication authors Patrick Otto of Kacoke Madit, and Chris Dolan.

From their different perspectives the members of the panel identified a number of key lessons learned from the failure of past initiatives for peace:

- The fact that the conflict has not threatened the state in Uganda has contributed to a relative lack of engagement by the North.
- A lack of knowledge by mediators leading the dialogue with the primary parties: poor information and a lack of training frequently undermined both trust and communication between the parties. Such knowledge could have been improved through wider consultation with those primarily affected by the conflict.
- Similarly, a lack of understanding of the motivations of the parties to the conflict, particularly the LRA, has left many initiatives unable to engage them constructively.
- A lack of understanding of the opposing parties of each other has plagued negotiation efforts, as has the lack of access to information and records of events.
- The interests of the parties involved, including regional actors, have not always been favourable to peace.
- Multiple and simultaneous peace initiatives lacking co-ordination and communication have been confusing both to the parties to the conflict and the mediators.
- There is a need to recognize the importance of culture and cultural institutions and practice for a lasting peace, particularly the role played by religious leaders, elders and women in reconciliation.
- There is a need for an inclusive political peace process built on and around engagement, dialogue and diplomacy.
- There is a need for governmental 'friends of peace in northern Uganda' to work more closely with non-state actors in the region.
- Despite an apparent 'fashion' for military solutions (the defeat of UNITA in Angola and the RUF in Sierra Leone), alone they are not enough.

Two questions were also raised with regard to the future:

- How do we support efforts to break the economic links which support the war? And;
- Are the belligerents ready for peace?

Concern with the current military operation was voiced by several panel members drawing attention to the fears and risks of the violence again spreading from southern Sudan down into northern Uganda resulting in the further loss of innocent lives. Concern was raised also with reference to the Amnesty Act, introduced in January 2000 offering Amnesty to returning combatants. Many of the channels of communication to the combatants are now disrupted and the return to Amnesty made difficult. In addition it is still unclear if the Amnesty Act is compatible with the Terrorist Act passed late last year after the LRA were named on the United States' list of terrorist organisations, or if the former is in part negated by the latter. It was also noted that the uncertainty among many people as to the sincerity of the Amnesty Act will require real effort to be overcome.

One of the stated aims of the current military operation is the rescue of abducted children, an issue which has received much attention also internationally over the past few years. In the seminar the issue of children was broadened by drawing attention also to the children who have not suffered from abduction but from the many other horrors of war, and are receiving little attention and resources from the international community. Particular mention was made of the high suicide rates among non-abductee children, and the risks involved in using the issue of abducted children as political capital and channelling aid exclusively in this direction and diverting it from other child-related development and aid.

Lack of sincerity in the pursuit of peace as a major obstacle for a lasting settlement of the conflict was expressed with specific relation to the primary parties. A particular worry was voiced over the status of Joseph Kony (LRA); his position and leadership in the bush will be difficult, if not impossible, to sustain should he return to civilian life after a peace settlement and it may therefore be unlikely that he should choose to do so. Instead of relying on a negotiated resolution to the conflict, it was therefore suggested that the focus should be shifted towards development to improve the standard of life in the north and respond to the grievances of the general population.

Finally the significant impact of the events of September 11, 2001 on the conflict in northern Uganda were noted. Having been a somewhat 'neglected' conflict on the international arena, the recent developments have both opened up opportunities for improved relations with Sudan and created potential for abuse of 'actions against terrorism' to the detriment of peace. In the pursuit of peace in northern Uganda it will therefore be important for northern governments to keep a close eye on developments

in the north and to hold on to demands for an inclusive political process and high standards of democracy and governance to underpin any lasting solution to the conflict. To this end they will find many allies among the local Acholi civil society. In the words of one of the participants, 'there is still an imperative for a peace process, and it is never too late to talk peace.'

The views and opinions expressed at the seminar were not shared by all but were put forward in presentations and during discussions.

The High Commissioner's speech is available in full on CR's website.