

conciliation resources

Speech by Professor George B. Kirya, High Commissioner for Uganda at a seminar organised by Conciliation Resources and Kacoke Madit

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Learning From Past Experiences to Inform Future Efforts: The Conflict in Northern Uganda

Mr. Chairman, distinguished ladies and gentlemen,

It really gives me great pleasure to be here with you this afternoon.

I would like to thank the organisers of this seminar for inviting me and for giving me this opportunity to speak to you on the important subject: "Learning from past experiences to inform future efforts: the conflict in northern Uganda."

I would like to pay special tribute and thanks to the "Conciliation Resources" in collaboration with Kacoke Madit, and to the Issue Editor, Mr. Okello Lucima for their wonderful publication — 'Accord: Protracted conflict, elusive peace initiatives to end the violence in northern Uganda'.

The first lesson, I hope we have all learnt, is how important it is to document what is going on around us; partly as a way of informing others and also as an important exercise of keeping our history. The publication by the Conciliation Resources goes into some detail listing and spelling out the many steps and attempts that have been taken by the Uganda government and others to bring about peace in northern Uganda.

Because this information is not available to all those affected by the conflict, you find many both within and outside Uganda who blame government and their associates for doing nothing to bring about cessation of conflicts in northern Uganda. There are even some cynics who talk of the government supporting the continued conflict in the north.

I am glad to know that the publishers intend to translate the publication in a number of Uganda's local languages to enable as many Ugandans as possible to access this information. I hope that those reading this document are, and will be amazed to see that as many as 18 and more, documented peace agreements, peace statements,

ceasefire statements and so on, were put in place, and yet peace continued to elude that part of the country.

This reminds us of the two old sayings that "It takes two to tango", secondly, "You can take a horse to the well but you cannot force it to drink the water's In the same vain, you may formulate agreements, resolutions, peace accords, but if all the parties involved are not ready or willing to implement the decisions, those decisions are not even worth the paper they are written on.

The second lesson, therefore, is to realize that most conflicts take time to resolve. Without removing the eye "off the ball" as far as government is concerned, and while applying the right policies for resolving the conflict, time and patience are two essential components in every peace process.

In the letter that invited me to speak, I was asked to give a Government perspective on the lessons learned from the conflict to date and the challenges for the future. I wish to state categorically that this is not a government statement. It is my personal analysis as a concerned and interested Ugandan.

Another lesson we are all learning as we tackle terrorism and rebel activities, is to ask the question "Why anyone should decide to become a terrorist or a rebel?" This should not be taken as trying to condone these activities. It should be looked at like we study the epidemiology of any medical disease or condition. Unless the medical people know the cause of the condition, its natural habitat and the way it is transmitted from person to person, it is almost impossible to prescribe the right treatment of the right dose and duration, and most importantly, how to control future cases to occur, even if it is through genetic change.

Social scientists and politicians ought to adopt this policy as we work towards conflict prevention conflict resolution and fight against terrorism. There is need to have facilities to study the psychology and political pulse of the protagonists and to understand the nature and causes of conflicts.

Another important lesson we have all learnt, I hope, is the importance of building trust and confidence in the leadership and government of the day. Mistrust, failure to cultivate even minimum respect and acceptance of the leadership of any country, whether we like the leader or not, greatly undermines any peace efforts put in place and often impairs further the relationship between belligerents. In case of

northern Uganda, there are people who, for a long time, never accepted or trusted the leadership of President Museveni and his government, thus contributing greatly to the protracted conflict and elusive peace initiatives.

Another lesson that has been emphasized by the continuous conflicts in northern Uganda is that without peace and security, development becomes almost impossible. We end up by getting conflicts rooted in socio-political south and socio-political north, breeding rivalry, intolerance, and suspicion, even when steps are taken by government to develop the area.

They often say that the first casualty in any conflict or war is the Truth. The conflicts in northern Uganda have been no exception. Yet conflict resolution, calls for intellectual honesty on the side of the educated and the elite. We cannot afford not to inform correctly the uninformed part of the society and expect that the hard views, which may be contributing to the conflict, will be changed by that society. This is why I have often wondered why some sections of the media continually gave misleading information and often sounded anti-government. I also wondered why some of the intelligentsia tended to mislead the public.

Here we have the lesson to learn that while allowing freedom expression by the media and everybody, we need to do appreciating our obligations as citizens of the world, and our role nation builders, since knowledge is power.

One lesson being learnt all over the world is that belligerence does not bring about peace anywhere. You may be forced to start off by fighting each other. But for lasting, peace and stability one needs engagement, dialogue and diplomacy, where all parties concerned are involved. We often chose our friends but we rarely, if ever, choose our enemies. That is why you have to dialogue with all parties involved in a conflict.

The northern Uganda conflicts have shown how important religious leaders of all denominations, cultural leaders, the elders in the community, the women who are often the greater victims of conflicts, and civil society organisations, and friends in international organisations can play an important role in conflict resolution and conflict prevention. It is also important that we recognize and respect our positive cultural behaviour. There is no reason why we all do not show support of the mato oput ceremony, which the Acholi believe in, bringing true healing and reconciliation. We have tended to neglect our cultures and have preferred to adopt those from other countries. No wonder many of our children have lost the discipline that used to bind

families together and which directly or indirectly checked on such behaviour like becoming a rebel.

In the Accord publication, I saw eleven insurgency or rebel groups mentioned. We have the Holy Spirit Mobile Forces (HSMF), the Lords Resistance Army (LRA), the National Army for the Liberation of Uganda (NALU), the Allied Democratic Force (ADF) and so on. The very first challenge we all have, not only the government, is to see that we get rid of these insurgencies and never to allow them take a foothold in our areas.

I am not a rebel-activity analyst, nor can I claim to be expert in rebel strategy. I am, however, told that rebels cannot settle in any place unless they have the support of the community in the area.

We have seen that rebel activities never win, but only disrupt and create mayhem. The conflict in northern Uganda should make us vow, never to allow such activities to take place in any of our areas. It is, therefore, a big challenge how we collectively ensure that violence and conflict in northern Uganda stop.

The second challenge is building confidence between the population in the different parts of northern Uganda, and Uganda as a whole, among the population themselves and with government. We need the support and guidance of one another.

The third challenge is bringing the badly needed development in the region. This should include infrastructure, schools, medical services, transport, clean water, industries and so on. But this requires sustained peace and stability.

The last and equally important challenge is to forget our tribal, religious and regional differences and look at one another as Ugandans, first and foremost.

We should develop a culture of total co-existence as Ugandans and being keepers of our brothers and sisters, regardless of the areas we come from or our religions.

I am glad to say that recently there have been positive developments that make one feel that, may be, and only may be, we may see the dawn of peace in northern Uganda which may become a day, sooner rather than later.

1. On April 25, 2002, President Omar Hassan El Bashir sent a Special Envoy (his Foreign Minister) to President Museveni, with a message

on:

- (i) Peace and development in the region where Sudan decided to work within the IGAD region to forge the Peace programme, the Health programme and the Economic and Commercial programme, in tandem.
 - (ii) President Museveni welcomed the proposal fully.
 - (iii) Sudan feels that enough is enough with regard to the conflict in the country, since after so many years of fighting none of the conflicting parties have defeated each other. They are, therefore, working for dialogue with Dr. Garang. They also want to be flexible on the Sharia law.
 - (iv) On bilateral relations, there was agreement for both countries to jointly get rid of Kony and his LRA, establish full diplomatic relationship between the two countries and establish a Joint Ministerial Committee in various areas of cooperation.
2. As you know, the government of Uganda introduced the Amnesty Act in January 2000. This was, however, rejected in very strong terms by Kony and his group. I am glad to say that on April 25, 2002, over 1350 combatants of the Uganda National Rescue Front returned to Uganda with their weapons. They permanently renounced rebellion, under the Amnesty Act.
 3. On April 26, 2002, a Joint Communiqué was released spelling out the issues discussed on April 25th. There is a feeling that this time, the contents of this Communiqué are real, and ready to be implemented.

Lastly, let me pay special thanks to Kacoke Madit for mobilizing the Acholi Community in the diaspora and for sensitizing them towards contributing to the solution of the northern Uganda conflict. The beginning was difficult and tricky, but you have made it.