

The Voice of Peace

News and views from conflict-affected areas of Central African Republic (CAR),
Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), South Sudan and Uganda



In northern Uganda crushing an egg underfoot is part of a symbolic ceremony used to reconcile former LRA fighters with their communities. Image courtesy of Justice and Peace Commission-Gulu.

Step on the egg: the path to reconciliation

“Step on the egg and you’ll be a free man!” bellows an elder at the Chief’s palace in Gulu, northern Uganda. This prompts Caesar Achellam, the once notorious Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) rebel leader, to roll up his trousers and do as he is told. 82 former LRA combatants and abductees follow him.

On 5 March 2015 Achellam and the other former captives took part in a traditional cleansing ceremony of the Acholi ethnic group called *nyono tong gweno* (step on the egg). The ceremony has historically been used to welcome home an individual family member after a long absence. In light of the large number of people affected by the LRA, the Acholi cultural leadership adapted it to symbolically accept groups of returnees back into the community and ease their reintegration. Since 2005, several thousand fighters have undergone the ceremony.

The egg is placed on an *opobo*, a branch with a soapy sap traditionally used to wash clothes, and a *layebi*, a stick with a fork used to open granaries. The egg symbolizes purity. “It has no mouth, and cannot speak ill of others,” an elder explained. The *opobo* cleanses the returnee of any bad influences and experiences he/she had in the bush. The *layebi* signifies that family members will once again eat together.

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We are forgiven and we also forgive

In a speech after the ceremony Achellam on behalf of the other returnees asked for forgiveness from those they had wronged. He also forgave those people whose actions could have prolonged their stay in the bush, including those who said they should stay there lest the government soldiers kill them on their return.

Achellam acknowledged the role played by the government's Amnesty Commission, noting that the amnesty certificate they had all received was an assurance they had been forgiven, and by Ker Kwaro Acholi, the Acholi cultural institution, in reconciling and reintegrating former fighters.

What lies ahead?

Despite the ceremony's noble gestures and kind words, the lives of returnees remain uncertain. A young lady returnee asked, "Now that I have been received and have the amnesty certificate I will go back home. But how shall I stay in the community?"

Many returnees expected the amnesty programme to provide a resettlement package that would help them start up new lives. But since the government cut its funding, the commission only hands out certificates.

Community members, many of whom suffered LRA violence, still have reservations about living alongside former LRA fighters. They say it is easy to forgive, but they will never forget the atrocities Joseph Kony's group committed. In the long run, their unease could turn to resentment and friction.

Traditional, religious and government leaders still have an important role to play in reconciling former LRA abductees with their communities in northern Uganda, Congo, CAR and South Sudan. A broken egg is just the beginning.

Editorial

Welcome to the 13th edition of the *Voice of Peace* (VOP). This past quarter has seen northern Uganda's traditional leaders try to reconcile former LRA abductees and combatants with their communities with a powerfully symbolic ceremony. But we are reminded that winning back the trust of family and neighbours takes a long time and hard work on both sides.

Across LRA-affected areas communities are striving to reintegrate former LRA. In South Sudan we meet a young lady who, on her return from captivity, finds it difficult to cope with life as a wife and mother. But local church and civil society organisations – demonstrating the critical role of community support groups – have helped her and her husband put the past behind them.

In CAR we meet a woman who sets an inspiring example. She uses her business and position in society to bring positive change to the lives of her home community, still living in the shadow of the LRA.

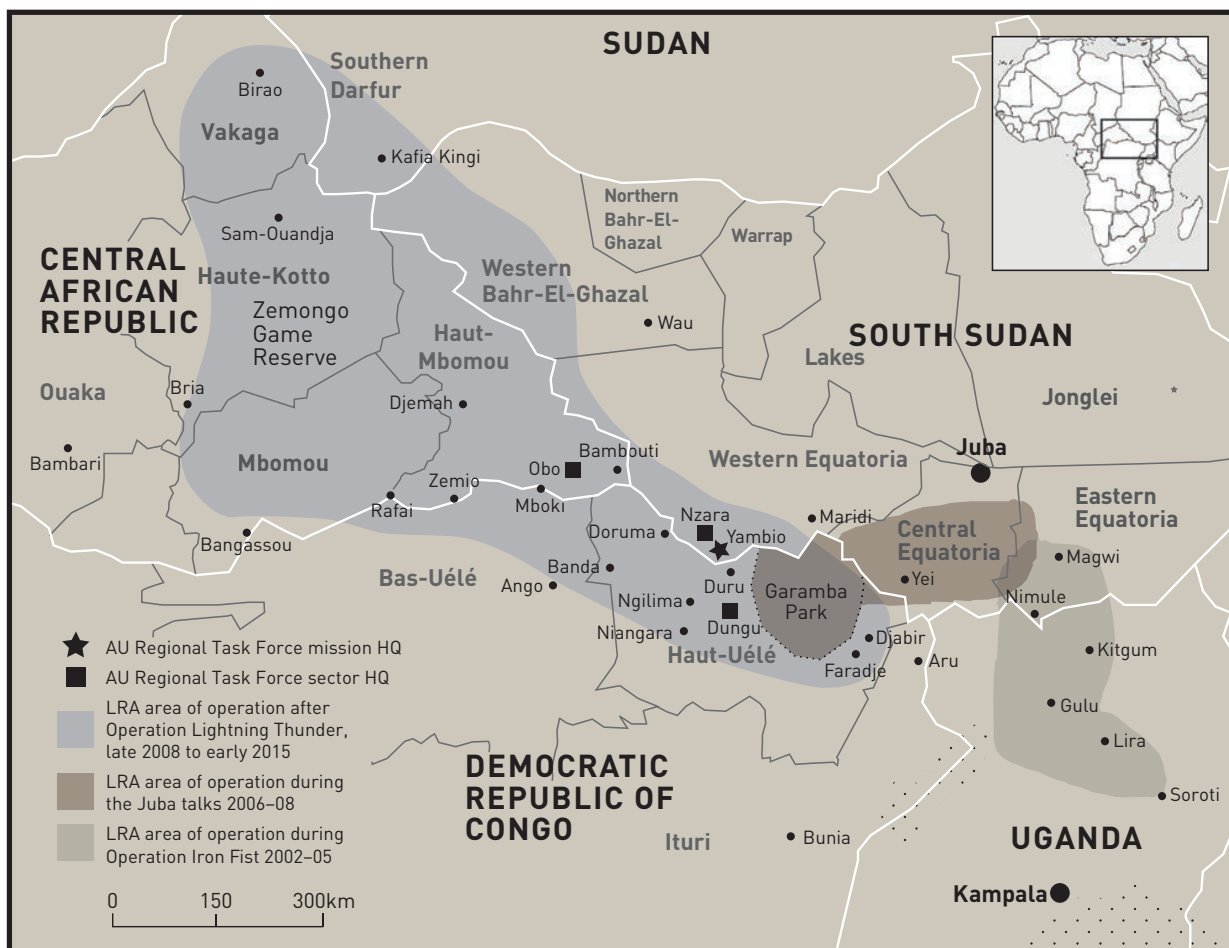
We then turn our attention to DRC where the decentralisation process – meant to improve government administration – is facing numerous challenges. Limited resources and bad roads in



many parts of the country are hampering roll-out. It has also led to conflicts over administrative boundaries in Haut-Uele in the northeast, an already fragile and neglected border area.

Enjoy the read and remember to send us your feedback. See the back page for our email addresses.

Dixon Odur, Editor-in-Chief



Map of LRA affected areas. © Conciliation Resources

Regional Security Review: January-April 2015

CAR: Between January and April 2015, in the west and north of the country anti-Balaka militia and former Seleka have clashed with each other and with international peacekeepers while various militia groups have preyed on civilians. Bangui, the capital has experienced waves of unrest and violent crime, peaking in late April.

Since LRA commander Dominic Ongwen was sent to The Hague for trial in February the LRA has increased its attacks on civilians in the south-east. On 21 March, LRA elements kidnapped 15 Congolese refugees living in a camp at Zemio, CAR while they were farming on the DRC side of the border. 13 (two women and 11 men) were freed two days later and returned, but three boys are still missing. Other victims of LRA attacks in Bas-Uele district, DRC continue to arrive in CAR, including a 16-year-old girl who had been raped. 14 supposed LRA members surrendered in Akpiro village near Bambouti on the border with South Sudan; all were men between 25 and 30 years old who spoke Acholi and Lingala.

DRC: In North and South Kivu in the east, armed groups including the Democratic Liberation Forces of Rwanda (FDLR) and the Mai Mai-Yakutumba have continued to kill, rape and pillage. The Ugandan rebel group Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) has killed more than 140 people in Beni territory in this period. One of its leaders, Jamil Mukulu, was arrested on 5 May 2015 in Tanzania and will soon be extradited to Uganda. Meanwhile the Front for Patriotic Resistance in Ituri (FRPI) group continues to commit abuses in Ituri district, Province Orientale. Because of this violence more than 6,000 people are displaced. The Congolese army is pursuing operations against these groups but due to a string of disputes the government has decided that rapid reaction force of MONUSCO, the UN peacekeeping mission, will no longer fight alongside national forces.

In Haut-Uele and Bas-Uele districts, Province Orientale LRA groups have persistently raided villages and robbed travellers, mainly kidnapping civilians temporarily to transport stolen goods but killing on occasion. LRA activity has been

concentrated in two areas: on the fringes of Garamba National Park especially to the north-west near Duru and to the south between Sambia and the village known as Route 4; and north-west of Ango in Bas-Uele district around the villages of Bili, Bakwakondo and Basokpio east of Digba. In this period the LRA has killed 22 people including Congolese soldiers. Other armed groups including well-armed poachers have killed 17 across the Ueles.

South Sudan: The stalled national peace talks and violations of cessation of hostilities agreements has allowed killings, displacement, destruction and refugee flows to continue. Fighting has been most intense in Jonglei and Unity states between forces loyal to the government in Juba and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) – in opposition.

In Western Equatoria State, a surprise attack by the LRA at Nabiapai on the border with DRC on 3 March was the first after at least two years of calm. The LRA raided the village and abducted 11 people. The local self-defence group, the Arrow Boys, pursued the assailants. In the exchange of fire that followed, one Arrow Boy and one LRA fighter were killed before the attackers retreated into Congo. The LRA later released the 11 captives, the oldest first. With this new attack, over 430 people remain displaced at Nabiapai. In addition hundreds of displaced remain at Ezo and Source Yubu.

Uganda: In the past four months, Uganda has witnessed a series of high profile murders. In early January, Sheikh Abdul Qadir Muwaya, a top leader of the Shia Muslim community, and his comrade Sheikh Mustafa Bahiga, were shot dead by men on motorbikes in two separate attacks. On 30 March, Joan Kagezi, the lead prosecutor in the trial of 13 people suspected of carrying out the July 2010 bombings in Kampala, was gunned down by two assailants. Investigations are ongoing.

In northern Uganda, a long-running controversy over the borderline between Amuru and Adjumani districts has seen tensions mount between the government and people of Apaa village. In 2002, while residents were taking refuge in displaced persons camps, parliament approved a change in the border demarcation. Soon after their return the government told them to leave, which has led to the current protests. On 16 April, exasperated after a two-week curfew, a group of elderly women stripped naked in front of ministers as a non-violent protest. The move led the government to suspend the demarcation process. The bewildered ministers requested the immediate release of six people who had been arrested and asked the army and the police to leave the area immediately.

Congo: more provinces, more problems

In April 2015 for the first time in living memory tensions mounted between the people of Dungu and Niangara territories in Haut-Uele district, DRC. An angry crowd marched through the neighbourhood of Makolongulu (Eti locality) part of Niangara territory on the edge of Dungu town. This new disturbance is the consequence of the government's push to decentralise the administration, and the process has only just begun.

The idea of decentralisation is a good one. The distribution of power away from the capital Kinshasa towards the provinces and rural towns should enable the Congolese people to make their problems known to government officials and hold them to account. They should also benefit more from the natural resources in their areas.

To achieve this democratic change, the government plans to increase the number of provinces from 12 to 26. In January 2015 President

Kabila promulgated a decree creating these new administrative areas. But applying this new law will not be easy. First, the government will struggle to stretch its limited resources to cover both the decentralisation and electoral processes and to complete the former before it leaves power. Second, many of the new provinces including Haut-Uele and Bas-Uele are almost inaccessible by road.

Orientale Province in the north east, among the biggest in the country, is set to become four new smaller provinces: Haut-Uele, Bas-Uele, Ituri and Tchopo. When Haut-Uele becomes a province the boundaries between its component territories will also change. Dungu territory is set to gain the busy commercial centre of Makolongulu from Niangara territory, the latter's principal source of tax revenue and pride.

Not surprisingly the people of Niangara territory, mainly of Ngbetu and Bangba ethnicity, are not



The current boundary between Niangara and Dungu territories, Haut-Uele district, DRC. A planned adjustment will have economic and political consequences for inhabitants.

happy at the prospect of losing Makolongulu, and they now see the people of Dungu territory, mainly of Zande ethnicity, as the instigators. Hence April's peaceful but angry march. The consequences could be worse still. The majority of farmers from Dungu tend fields in the Kopa chefferie, Niangara territory. They run the risk of being pushed out and losing their means of survival.

Once again the games of politicians are having painful consequences for ordinary people. The growing dispute between Dungu and Niangara territories and between the Zande and Ngbetu and Bangba people is just one of many new conflicts across the country. The disputes put at even greater risk the smooth running of municipal, provincial and presidential elections in the coming months.

The decentralisation process should go ahead – the law is passed – but the government needs to

concentrate its energy on explaining the new law and its implications to the Congolese people. It should empower civil society organisations and religious leaders to act as valuable intermediaries between the state and its citizens.

Where conflict arises provincial governments should identify respected individuals to listen to each party's grievances and to guide them to compromise. In Haut-Uele, if no one is capable of finding a solution to the conflict between Dungu and Niangara territories, the provincial assembly at Isiro should debate the problem and consider finding a new boundary that satisfies both territories. A lasting peace in this fragile border area depends on finding a solution that is acceptable to both sides.

The woman who went the extra mile

Pierrette Dimbeti is a Central African businesswoman with a moral compass. Despite her elevated and comfortable position in society, she chose to use her business to help the people of her home province, Haut-Mbomou prefecture in south-east CAR where the LRA continues to pose a constant threat to security and development.

Business savvy

Pierrette has worked at the Credit mutuel de Centrafrique (CMCA) bank in Bangui for 16 years. She is also the head of her own transport company. But instead of just enjoying her earnings, she uses her business to help her people. To counter chronic poverty and injustice in Haut-Mbomou, she has for the last 12 years been

transporting goods between Bangui and Obo by lorry, a journey of 1,350km along a difficult and sometimes dangerous road. She even sends her trucks 110km further east to Bambouti on the border with South Sudan.

Pierrette explains, "When my vehicles arrive in these places it gives me great satisfaction, especially since the people who will benefit from these services are my family. I am happy that I can do something to alleviate the transport problem between Bangui and the south-east." She visits Obo regularly and works with Femme Homme Action Plus (FHAP), a local NGO, to inspire the women there to work, engage in public affairs and claim their rights.

Sad memories

Pierrette's determination to keep on trucking is driven by bitter memories. She cannot forget what the "tongo-tongo" – the name Central Africans use for the LRA – did to her family. "When these outlaws arrived in 2008 they attacked my father's village and committed the worst crimes in the history of my people. In 2009, they killed my father's brother and completely ransacked my village, 65 km east of Obo, forcing all the residents to flee."

"I am also a victim because it's my family that has suffered these atrocities. And more recently in 2013, they attacked two of my vehicles, killing one of the drivers."

In 2011 Pierrette successfully ran for parliament and, following selection by the people of Haut-Mbomou, she now represents them in the National Transitional Council.



*Pierrette Dimbeti: social entrepreneur.
Image courtesy of FHAP.*

Women already have a lot of responsibility. They give birth, bring up children and look after the home. In CAR, they face the extra challenges of insecurity and a lack of basic social services. Nevertheless, the example of Pierrette Dimbeti reminds us that women should and can go the extra mile for people who need help, especially those who live in far off areas where they are vulnerable to armed groups.

Tough love: marriage after the LRA

Like many women captured by the LRA, Nako returned to her home in Western Equatoria State, South Sudan with a child born in captivity. It made the challenge of picking up normal life even harder. "When we came back," she explains, "most men in the community feared us. We were seen as damaged goods because of the rape and sexual slavery we went through in the bush."

But against all odds, Nako found love and was soon married to Pierre who looked beyond her troubled past. From the start, their marriage was rocky. Nako was so restless that she could not stay at home even for one hour. She beat her own

child and would become very aggressive over even the smallest disagreement.

Her behaviour worried her family and neighbours greatly. Nako was referred to the Inter Church Committee (ICC), a local civil society organisation, which encouraged her to take part in a trauma-healing course. The three-day workshop sought to heal former abductees' psychological wounds and help them reintegrate into their community and family life.

Two weeks later, a group from the Self Help Women's Development Association (SHWDA), a local women's network, made a follow-up visit



Nako, a former LRA abductee, her husband Pierre and their family and neighbours. Image courtesy of SHWDA.



Former LRA abductees re-enact past experiences as part of a trauma-healing workshop, Western Equatoria State, South Sudan. Image courtesy of SHWDA.

and was astounded by the changes in Nako's behaviour. She was now confident in herself and more welcoming.

Pierre was a lot happier too. Before the ICC's intervention, he found it difficult to contain Nako's outbursts and even contemplated divorce. But thanks in part to the workshop and advice

from Nako's parents, Pierre persevered. "It is a challenge but we have to marry them [former abductees] so that they are integrated into the community and forget bush life." He concluded, "Those who fear former LRA fighters or the women they abducted should recognize that some are good, hard working women. Just be patient with them."

About The Voice of Peace

The Voice of Peace is a quarterly newsletter that aims to increase understanding among local communities and national and international policymakers of the severe challenges faced by people living in conflict-affected areas of CAR, DRC, South Sudan and Uganda.

It is written and produced by local civil society groups with support from Conciliation Resources, a UK-based peacebuilding organisation. It gives local actors a voice on problems that have a profound impact on their lives and the opportunity to inform the solutions.

This and past editions are available at www.c-r.org/resources/voice-peace

Contributing civil society organisations:

- Solidarité et Assistance Intégrale aux Personnes Démunies (SAIPED), DRC
- Commission Diocésaine de Justice, Paix et Réconciliation (CDJPR), DRC
- Réseau des Organisations Féminines des Uélés (ROFU), DRC
- Femme Homme Action Plus (FHAP), CAR
- Inter Church Committee (ICC), South Sudan
- Self Help Women's Development Association (SHWDA), South Sudan
- Justice and Peace Commission, Gulu (JPC-Gulu), Uganda
- Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI), Uganda

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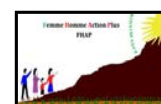
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