

## **CASE STUDY OF “RELIGIONS AND MEDIATION IN URBAN AREAS”**

### **Descriptive title of the case:**

**The long-term war that has been devastating the North of the country was demanding the union and mobilisation of the Acholi religious leaders.**

### **Location (including brief description):**

The sub-region called “Acholiland”, in Northern Uganda (East Africa), an area traditionally inhabited by the Acholi people.

### **Approximate start and end dates (if applicable) of the mediation process:**

This file is not about a particular case or mediation process but, more generally, about the work the ARLPI has been doing since 1997, when it was created, until now, while the conflict in Northern Uganda still goes on.

**Different actors (religious, interreligious, political, etc.) involved (including their main characteristics and the reasons of the involvement of the mediating actors):**

**Actors directly involved:**

- **The Acholi people:** approximately 1.17 million people living in Northern Uganda and 45,000 more in southern Sudan. Most Acholi are Protestant or Catholic and, in lesser numbers, Muslim. Nevertheless, the traditional belief in guardian and ancestor spirits remains strong, though it is often described in Christian or Islamic terms. The Acholis are being ostracised because, of the fact that the Lord's Resistance Army (see below )leader is an Acholi and every crime he commits is seen as being committed by the Acholis.
- **Other people and ethnic groups living in Northern Uganda:** the Jie, the Pian, the Bokora, the Itesots, the Langi, etc.
- **The Ugandan government,** ruled by president Museveni since 1986, and its army (The Uganda People's Defence Force –UPDF). Museveni's presidency has included involvement in the civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo and other conflicts in the Great Lakes region, as well as the civil war against the Lord's Resistance Army.
- **The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA):** a religious and military group based in Northern Uganda. Formed in 1987 and engaged in an armed rebellion against the Ugandan government in one of Africa's longest-running conflicts. Led by Joseph Kony, who proclaims himself to be the "spokesperson" of God and a spirit medium, primarily of the Holy Spirit (which the Acholi believe can represent itself in many manifestations). The group is based on apocalyptic Christianity, but also is influenced by a blend of Mysticism and traditional religion, and claims to be establishing a theocratic state based on the Ten Commandments and Acholi tradition. The LRA is accused of widespread human rights violations, including murder, abduction, mutilation, sexual enslavement of women and children and forcing children to participate in hostilities.

**Mediating actors:**

- **The Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI):** a Christian-Muslim cooperation working for peace in Acholiland but also throughout Uganda and internationally. This interfaith peace building and conflict transformation organisation was formed in 1997 as a proactive response to the conflict in Northern Uganda. It brings the religious leaders of four different religious communities together (Muslim, Catholic, Anglican and Orthodox). The Anglican bishop Macleod Baker Ochola II is one of the founding members (see this interview in Catalan about him: <http://paper.avui.cat/article/societat/42412/la/religio/ens/fa/admetre/tots/som/iguals.html>).

**Key information related to the background and the context of the case (before the mediation process):**

Causes: the roots of the current war between the government of Uganda and the LRA in Acholiland are directly linked to the history of political conflicts in the country following the overthrow of dictator and criminal Idi Amin. The conflict has persisted because of fragmented and divisive national politics and strategies adopted by its protagonists and because of regional and international interests. Indeed, the war in the sub-region has become an extension of regional and international power struggles. It has also destabilised other parts of the country and contributed to other regional conflicts in the Great Lakes region. The multi-faceted and interrelated causes and consequences of the war should not, therefore, be seen as an exclusively Acholi issue. Many other groups have been involved. There are also other conflicts caused by different ethnic groups and which have equally caused inter-tribal conflicts and mass population movement.

Consequences: the war has claimed many innocent civilian lives, forcefully displaced over 400,000 people and destroyed schools and health centres. The situation has been characterised by widespread and systematic violations of human rights, including rapes, abductions of men, women and children, torture, increased economic decay, and national and regional insecurity. This war has devastated the Acholi society, reducing it to displacement camps, where people languish without assistance and protection. There are large numbers of orphans and furthermore, some children have been abducted by the LRA and forced to torture and kill.

**Initial objectives of the mediation intervention:**

The following were the primary reasons for the creation of the ARLPI:

- To unite and mobilise the people of Acholi, other people and ethnic groups in Northern Uganda to promote peace and development and, at the same time, to advocate for social justice and human rights in a conflict situation.
- To build capacity in conflict analysis and resolution and community peace building.
- To promote peaceful co-existence and good neighbourliness for different communities in Northern Uganda, starting with the Acholi and its neighbours.
- To undertake any other activities which may contribute to the creation and promotion of love, harmony, forgiveness, reconciliation, healing and peace.

## **Brief description of the development of the mediation carried out and of the case itself:**

As it has already been said, this file is not about a particular case or mediation process. The following are just two examples of particular local conflicts where the ARLPI has been mediating:

**Example 1: Conflict between the Jie and the Acholi people** (February 1999 – February 2000).

A violent conflict broke out between the Jie and Acholi communities in February 1999. The Jie warriors from the Karimojong subregion came and attacked the Acholi community in Agago County, their district. Over eighty innocent people were brutally killed, women and girls were gang-raped, and the whole population of Agago County was displaced to the trading centres of Patongo and Kalongo. The people were displaced without basic necessities such as food, clothing and shelter. There were no medical provisions or sanitation facilities for the displaced people, who had to fend for themselves under nearly unbearable situations. The massive population displacement lasted for three months.

Unfortunately, there was no response from the government of Uganda throughout the time that the people of Agago were living in the displacement camp. However, as soon as the Jie warriors left the affected areas, the government quickly responded by supplying the locals with 100 guns per subcounty in Agago County. The intention was for the people of Agago to take revenge against the Jie community for the atrocities they had committed against the Acholi people.

The ARLPI strongly protested against this move by the government of Uganda. According to the ARLPI, the move was an incitement of one ethnic group against another. Nonetheless, the government went ahead and supplied the locals in Agago with the guns. However, this small number of guns could not be used against the Jie warriors, who had hundreds of thousands of guns. The government was fully aware of all these facts, but still allowed the Karimojong warriors to defend themselves against the cattle rustlers from the Tobosa tribe in Sudan and from the Turkana and Pokot tribes in Kenya. This was a divide-and-rule policy, because only the Karimojong warriors were allowed to have possession of illegal guns in Uganda.

The ARLPI took the initiative to intervene through mediation between the Jie and Acholi communities. The ARLPI persuaded them to resolve their violent conflict through peaceful dialogue. The Jie-Acholi peace mediation began in earnest in November 1999 and continued until February 2000. The end result of the peace mediation was fruitful because the two communities eventually realised that peaceful coexistence was the only remedy for their violent conflict and they needed each other if they were to coexist and preserve their future destiny peacefully together.

**Example 2: Conflict between the Langi and the Acholi, due to an LRA rebels massacre in a Displacement Camp (April 2004).**

There was an incident at Barlonyo, a camp for Internally Displaced People (IDP), in April 2004. It was alleged that LRA rebels massacred over 2,200 innocent people at the Barlonyo IDP camp in the Lira district of the Lango subregion. This brutality inflicted by the Acholi people on the innocent people of Lango infuriated the Langi people. All of this resulted in bitter ethnic sentiments against the Acholi people. Thus, there seemed to be a plan to kill all the Acholi people in the Lira and Apac districts of the Lango sub-region.

A community prayer meeting was officially organised in the city of Lira to remember those killed in the massacre at the Barlonyo IDP camp. However, things did not go as planned. All of a sudden, there was a riot in Lira during the memorial prayer for the dead. There were some people in the crowd with bad intentions who wanted to cause major problems between the Lango and Acholi tribes. However, the UPDF military promptly intervened and successfully prevented a genocide between the two communities, who had lived together peacefully for centuries. Nevertheless, a few people were killed by the rioters in Lira.

The ARLPI immediately took the initiative to intervene through mediation between the two tribes to resolve the conflict by peaceful means, which was able to help to avoid genocide.

## Evaluation of the grade of success in reaching the initial objectives:

The ARLPI peacebuilding action in Northern Uganda has been developed in different fields (Peace Education, Lobbying and Advocacy, etc.). These are some of the results obtained:

(1) **Peace Education.** The ARLPI has strategically put emphasis in creating greater awareness on issues dealing with conflict, peace and peaceful resolution of conflict in Northern Uganda. This was aimed at the community in the North as well as the rest of the country and beyond. As a result, there is greater acceptance of the returnee rebels who have willingly or unwillingly committed crimes against them by the local community. There is also greater demand across all communities in Northern Uganda for the government to instigate peace talks with rebels to bring a lasting solution to the resolved conflict.

(2) **Lobbying and Advocacy.** The ARLPI significantly influenced the content of the National Amnesty Law to ensure its relevancy and appropriateness to the Acholi situation. Thus, the granting of a blanket amnesty to all former rebels who returned voluntarily without any prosecution, was our input in relation to the Acholi's cultural conflict resolution approach. Once adopted by parliament, the implementation caused the integration of thousands of returnees into their society. However, reintegration is still difficult because, among the many reasons, 92% of the communities are in camps and the government has not effectively supported the Amnesty Commission. Full benefit of the Amnesty Law was compounded by the Government drafting a Terrorism Act and classifying the LRA as a terrorist organisation, which dissuaded other rebels from emerging.

The ARLPI has played a significant role in initiating and urging the Government to come up with a Peace team to explore peaceful dialogue with the rebels. Since the President established the team, the ARLPI has made various efforts to link the LRA commanders with the Government Peace Team. However, currently this effort is some how in limbo, since when the religious and cultural leaders, and government team were planning to meet the LRAs, government forces who were duly informed of this process and made the arrangement, attacked the venue before the meeting. This created very high grounds for the LRA to be suspicious and they concluded that the Government was using our initiative to locate and kill them. As a consequence, the LRA leader (Joseph Kony) issued an order to kill any religious leader trying to initiate peace talk. However, ARLPI are determined to continue with peaceful dialogue to end the war

(3) **Peaceful mediation and conflict resolution.** The ARLPI has participated in mediating and resolving different inter-tribal conflicts. Its members have also initiated useful contacts and have on many occasions risked their lives in reaching out to the LRA rebels to bring them to the negotiation table with the Government of Uganda. As a result of this initiative, the President got convinced and appointed a Presidential Peace Team to start another re-negotiation for peace talks with the rebels. This was so beneficial that the rebels found their interest in peace talks rekindled for the first time since the failed Bigombe's peace initiative of 1994. The ARLPI played a significant role as observers and consultants in the Juba peace talks (2006-2008) between the government of Uganda and the LRA in southern Sudan. Archbishop John Baptist Odama was physically present at the talks in his capacity as chairman of ARLPI. The talks, held in Juba, the capital of autonomous Southern Sudan, began in July 2006 and were mediated by the Government of Southern Sudan. These talks, which resulted in a ceasefire by September 2006, were described as the best chance ever for a negotiated settlement to the 20-year-old war. However, LRA leader Joseph Kony refused to sign the peace agreement in April 2008. Two months later, the LRA carried out an attack on a Southern Sudanese town, prompting the Government of Southern Sudan to officially withdraw as mediators.

**Mediator resources mobilised (human, spiritual, communitarian, etc. resources belonging to the involved actors or resources of the mediating actors):**

- **The Acholi's cultural conflict resolution approach and its institution of cultural leaders.** These elements have been very instrumental in traditional Acholi in aspects of settlement of grave criminal offence through traditional means of reconciliation (*mato oput*). The revitalisation of the traditional leaders has greatly assisted in creating and maintaining peace in the sub-region. The ARLPI has been working very closely with the cultural leaders to build confidence and trust between the LRA and the Government of Uganda for a dialogue approach to end the conflict. They have managed to engage both the LRA and the Government of Uganda to accept the peaceful options. The traditional leaders are also engaged in inter-ethnic mediation with their counter leaders of different ethnic groups.

The importance of leadership is a key element outlined, here by bishop Ochola: "The lesson learnt from the armed conflicts in Africa is the importance of leadership as a prerequisite to sustainable peace and development. Good leadership can also guarantee the future destiny of a society. Poor leadership creates poverty, dependency, insecurity, redundancy, immorality, fear and uncertainty. Drunkenness flourishes in a situation where dependency and redundancy reign supreme in the lives of individuals. The Bible says that leadership without a vision will lead the people of God to perish politically, socially, economically and spiritually. In the last forty years of African independence, poor leadership in many African countries has reduced the African peoples almost to the state of animals controlled by instinct and fear. African children have been dying of poverty, HIV/AIDS and malnutrition in the midst of plenty as if they were not human beings with parents and responsible governments."

- **The religiosity and general religious principles of the African people itself** –as defined here by bishop Ochola again- other important elements to count on in mediation processes can be considered: "Anthropologists claim that African peoples are very religious in every aspect of life. Religion, from the African perspective, is an encounter with God, the creator of the universe, on a day-to-day basis. Religion, therefore, is a way of life in relationship with God, with all the living-dead ancestors of all the cultural communities of the world, and with one another. In this context, religion becomes the focus of the life activities of every community in the world. In Africa, every human aspect of life bears elements of religion. For instance, there is religion in agriculture, hunting, marriage, politics, economics, social activities, and finally in death as well as in life after death. Religion therefore is a common ground where people of different cultural identities can come together in the presence of God, who is holy and pure. In religion, people of different cultural identities continue to enjoy wonderful fellowship with all their living-dead ancestors on a daily basis. From the African perspective, our living-dead ancestors are very much part of our lives here on Earth. I think it is even so with Christians, who believe that the saints are part of us. Religion, therefore, as a unifying factor in human life, offers all peoples of the world the best opportunity for peaceful human coexistence. In this context, religion is very instrumental in conflict prevention and transformation throughout the world".