

**HOPE IN THE STORM: EXPERIENCE OF ARLPI IN
CONFLICT RESOLUTION OF THE NORTHERN
UGANDA ARMED CONFLICT**

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1.0 Background to the Northern Uganda conflict

The conflict in the Acholi sub-region of the Northern Uganda (NU) has lasted for about 18 years now, with tremendous negative impact in terms of human costs and development in the whole region. A study by civil societies carried in 2003 estimates that 3% of the annual GDP of Uganda is lost due to this war. The war has now spilt to the sub-regions of Lango and Teso, the latter located in the eastern region of Uganda.

Many lives have been lost, many people abducted, maimed and properties destroyed. Social services and development have been brought to near halt!! According to UNICEF, an estimated 30,000 children have been abducted since the beginning of the war, with most forcefully conscripted into rebel ranks or turned into being wives. Even more concerning is that when the Operation Iron Fists commenced in March 2002 by the national army, more than 5,000 children have been abducted. There has been massive displacement of the Acholi (92%), Langi (30%) and Iteso (33%) populations into Internally Displaced People's (IDPs) Camps. But within the past 18 years particularly in the Acholi sub-region, there has been over 95% of displacement of the population, some are now living outside the 3 districts.

The condition of living in the IDPs' camps is very pathetic and dehumanizing to say the least. Most population from these areas used to live in homes, which provided adequate respect and access to services and cultural values. Living in unplanned camps have destroyed these values and created misery particular for the adults and the youth. Studies by civil societies conclude that there is high malnutrition among all categories of people living in the camps; there are also increased vulnerability to contagious diseases among the people in the camps. Recently the parliament of Uganda has unanimously passed a motion that NU be declared a "disaster area". There is therefore great need for basic necessities of life: food, shelter, water and sanitation, clothing, medical care, etc. Importantly, both international and national communities should acknowledge that the moral fibre of the communities in the IDPs and

in the war-torn areas is eroding; and the long-term implication of this to the future generations is the concern of my organization.

There are displacements within communities and in urban areas that have been largely ignored by many people including relief agencies. There is consistent evidence that while these people, mainly children, could find temporal refuge in the urban areas, their security within the town is often not fully guaranteed. As such, a phenomenon of “night commuting to sleep in town and get back home during day time has evolved in Gulu and Kitgum.” In the cause of being away from their parents at night, there are reportedly unprotected cases of abuses mentored on these children. Often they are (particularly girls) raped, defiled and mistreated in their “places of abode” with very little legal redress. Many of them are also exposed to other hazards: the cold nights without any covers; the mosquito’s bites, etc.

This of course has a huge psychological effect on the children and their parents. Some of these children are school going; are forced to read/revise their works under the streetlights, when this is available. Importantly, they are faced with the challenge of competing with the rest of their peers in other parts of Uganda, where conditions are more conducive. As a result, many of our children have not been able to advance with their studies; most have failed to measure up to the criteria set for selections by national universities and other tertiary institutions. They cannot gain admissions into good institutions and find themselves remaining in the war-torn areas, where the standard of education has fallen below the national standard. The long effect is that, the northern region has declined in qualified human capacities and capabilities, which is essential for its rehabilitation. The north, which used to excel in education, only second to the central region in the 1960s; and where investment in education was very pronounced, is now trailing the rest of the country.

The dilemma of resolutions

Our view has consistently been that military solution will not bring lasting peace to the north. We have seen and proven this by the

increased displacement since the introduction of the operation iron fists in March 2002. There has been more death of both civilians and soldiers; more abductions and impoverishment in the region. We insist that peaceful dialogue is still the best way out however difficult it has been thus far. We content that building trust and a lasting peace can better be attained through peaceful dialogue. Partly, a large number of the LRA fighters are abducted children, who have been forced to fight against their will. Ironically, when the government army rescues some of these children who would have been killed by the helicopters, then they are easily branded abductees, and not rebels. This to us means that government and us agree that to save the lives of these innocent children, we could do more through persuasion than gambling using sophisticated military weapons, which cannot select between the rebels and the abducted children!

There is in our view a dilemma that has engulfed the Acholi of Uganda due to this war. Quite often the LRA have looked at the population as opposed to their operations. This is true because the LRA has always been hostile to the community. In many incidences, the government army has continued to associate forceful "remittance" of food and other resources by people to LRA as gesture of support by the community to the rebel. In such situation, the local population is caught between two fires as they are harassed, killed, by armed personnel; depending on which side reaches their area first. So whom should the local population trust? To whom should they turn in such circumstances?

Government has forced people into camps in order to implement its military policy, but unfortunately has not provided adequate security and support in those camps. Living in the camps has also rendered the population economically inactive, hence, making them dependant on handouts from relief agencies. It is creating a new generation of children that are born in fear and hopelessness. This situation has lasted for too long for a community, which has a strong culture of self-reliance, self-pride and a rich culture to share with the rest of the world under peacefulness.

Who then should give hope and help to the suffering people? Who should bring the warring factions (government and rebels) to a negotiation table and bring about a lasting peace and healing in the hearts of the aggrieved?

2.0 The Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative: Restoring hope and promoting peaceful dialogue

The Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI) is an interfaith forum that brings together Muslim and Christian (Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican) leaders in Acholi land to promote reconciliation and peaceful settlement of conflicts.

Conceived in 1997 and formally inaugurated in February 1998, ARLPI is committed to proactive peaceful resolution of conflicts in Uganda through community based mediation services: advocacy, capacity in building peaceful resolution including negotiation, community mobilization and awareness creation. ARLPI believes that the best and most sustainable approach to any conflict resolution is respect for the dignity of humanity, honesty and full participation of the key stakeholders in the conflict - "*Wan acel pi kuc.*"

Primary Objectives

1. To unite and mobilize the people of Acholi, other people and groups in Uganda for peace and development.
2. To promote peace and advocate for social justice & human rights in conflict situation.
3. To build capacity in conflict analysis & resolution community peace building.
4. To promote peaceful co-existence and good neighbourliness for different communities in Uganda, including the Acholi and its neighbours.
5. To undertake any other activities which may contribute to the creation and promotion of love, harmony, forgiveness, reconciliation, healing and peace.

3.0 ARLPI Experiences

Since its inception the ARLPI has undertaken a number of activities along side government, to promote peaceful conflict resolution and at the same time to bring hopes and smiles to the suffering people, even in the face of desperation.

3.1 Peace Education.

ARLPI has strategically put emphasis in creating greater awareness on issues dealing with conflict, peace and peaceful resolutions of conflict in the NU. This targeted the community in the North as well as the rest of the country and beyond. As a result of these there is now greater (i) acceptance of the returnee rebels by the local community who they have, willingly or unwillingly committed crimes against them; (ii) there is also greater demand across all communities in NU for government to talk peace with rebels to bring a lasting solution to the NU conflict; (iii) there has been increased support by local donors and diplomatic missions in Uganda towards peaceful resolution of the NU conflict; (iv) there has been great transformation in the last 1 year by the national parliament in reflecting how the conflict in NU can best be resolved.

3.2 Lobby and Advocacy.

The Amnesty Law – ARLPI significantly influenced the content of the National Amnesty Law to ensure that it relevancy and appropriateness to the local Acholi situation. Thus, the granting of a blanket amnesty to all former rebels who willfully came back, without any prosecution was our input in relation to the Acholi's cultural conflict resolution approach. Once adopted by parliament, the implementation has so far caused an integration of over 6000 returnees into their society. However, reintegration is still difficult because 92% of the communities are in camps. Secondly, government has not effectively supported the Amnesty Commission. Thirdly, the Amnesty Law has to be renewed after every six months by the president. The current amnesty expires on April 16, 2004 and yet about 90% of the "rebels" are still in the bush. Full benefit of the Amnesty Law has been compounded by Government drafting the

Terrorism Act and classifying the LRA as a terrorist organization, which scared off other rebels from coming out!

Presidential Peace Team – the ARLPI has played a significant role in initiating and urging Government to come out 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, because 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 a very high ground of suspicion on the part of the LRA who concluded that Government was using our initiative to locate and kill them. As such the LRA leader (Mr. Joseph Kony) issued an ultimatum to kill any religious leader trying to initiate peace talk. However, we are determined to continue with peaceful dialogue in ending the war.

Joint religious and cultural leaders peace efforts - The institution of cultural leaders has been very instrumental in traditional Acholi in aspects of settlement of grave criminal offence through traditional means of reconciliation (*mato oput*). The revitalization of the traditional leaders has greatly assisted creating and maintaining peace in the sub-region. 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. To date, the traditional leaders are also engaged in inter-ethnic mediation with their counter leaders of Lango and Itesot ethnic groups. They are trying to solve the growing tension and likely ethnic hatred among between the Langi and Itesot on the one hand, and the Acholi on the other, because of LRA incursions into their ethnic areas. The Acholis are being ostracized because, the LRA leader of LRA is an Acholi and every crime he commits is seen as committed by the Acholis!

3.3 Support to Former Abducted Children (FAC) and War Affected Persons (WAP).

This strategy aims at giving opportunities to the above category of people to re-start a new and productive life, through acquisition of employable skills. ARLPI is currently supporting payment of school fees to some FAC and offer them chances in vocational training.

3.4 Peaceful mediation and conflict resolution.

The conflict in N. Uganda is multi-pronged. Other than the civil conflict, there are also conflicts caused by the Karimojong warriors (cattle rustlers), which has equally caused mass population movement. The main tribal groups amongst the Karimojong causing inter-tribal conflict are: Jie, Pian and Bokora. ARLPI has participated in mediating and resolving inter-tribal conflict between the Karimojong warriors and its neighbouring tribes: the Jie with the Acholi conflict, the Itesots with the Pian and Bokora conflict.

The ARLPI has also initiated useful contacts and has on many occasions risked their lives in reaching out to the Lords Resistance Army (LRA) rebels to bring them to a negotiating 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 attitude benefited so much from the ARLPI contact with the rebels and re-kindled the interest for peace talk, since the failed Bigombe's peace initiative of the early 1994.

3.5 Research, documentation & dissemination

We collect and document information, data, and chronology of events, updates of the situation, press cuttings and report from peace committees. So far we have come with three publications to highlight different dimensions of the conflict, and they include: Let my people go (emphasizing the inhuman conditions in the camps), Seventy times seven (this talks about forgiveness for both the conqueror & the vanquished), and the War of words (which talks about the factual distortions, which provoke hostilities). These publications can be accessed from our website www.acholipeace.org. Members of the ARLPI have continued to disseminate information on

the conflict and its consequences in various international, regional, national and sub-national for a, and have continued to be appreciated and supported by various sympathizers of our course.

Because of these and other peace-focused activities, ARLPI and its members have received various awards for promotion of peace by UNESCO, NIWANO Peace Foundation in Japan and Mundo Nigro Magazine Fraternity/Comboni Missionaries Award in Spain, and Uganda Breweries Ltd. Has also given Peace Award.

3.6 Education.

Education is pre-requisite to meaningful peace. The focus of this initiative is to provide opportunities to children coming from war affected areas to gain access to quality education, that through there own means of living in IDPs could not have been afforded. With this in mind the ARLPI lobbied other government and institution and established Acholi Education Initiative (AEI). The Danish government, Irish Embassy and other local donations, have provided some money to cater for the education of these children.

Currently, 300 children are benefiting in education from this initiative, with the beneficiaries coming from the most affected districts of: Pader, Kitgum and Gulu.

3.7 Networking/collaboration.

ARLPI has developed the culture of working with and through other partners since peace building requires putting resources together human, material, financial, physical, professional and mental. In this partnership, our strategic allies have been Actionaid, UNDP, UNICEF, MCC, Pax Christis – Netherlands, Kacoke Madit. These have provided technical, financial and human resources that have facilitated activities of ARLPI

3.8 Other important contributions

Our main focus on advocacy at the moment is to influence government, development partners and other stakeholders to pursue a peaceful, rather than a military option in resolving the N. Uganda conflict. We also advocate for social justice and transformation, raise pertinent human rights abuses in the conflict--such as rapes by

warring factions, detention without trial, etc. In its advocacy objective, ARLPI has sent advocacy missions both to the Government of Uganda (including to the President and Members of Parliament) and internationally to the UN and governments and other civil society and faith based groups in the US, UK, EU, Germany, Sweden in the hope of bringing to light the forgotten conflict in N. Uganda. The intent of this effort is to have Northern Uganda declared a "Disaster Area". This advocacy initiative is beginning to pay. For instance, the EU, other governments and multilateral and bilateral agencies are already considering N. Uganda a disaster area in their own context, against the Government of Uganda's executive decision that it is not!!

At a policy level, the EU and the British Government have concurred with the Uganda Parliament to declare the north a disaster area, in order for N. Uganda to receive the international attention and support, a disaster area deserves. This position however has not augured well with the executive arm of the Government of Uganda that looks at declaring N. Uganda a disaster area as an undermining of its ability to resolve the conflict.

This is despite the immense suffering of the people caught in the conflict. They are promising to focus their programmes to alleviate the suffering in the north, though they needed to urge their own parliaments to bear pressure on Ugandan Government to accept this position given the suffering on the ground! UN Representative clearly stated that the humanitarian situation in N. Uganda is the worst in the whole world, worse than Iraq. This raised the profile and significance of the conflict internationally.

3.9 Training and Capacity building.

It was essential that ARLPI reaches out to the population with messages of peace, love and reconciliation. However, it required adequate capacity to undertake this task: structurally and technically.

- *Structural capacity*– to facilitate the work of ARLPI in community, there was need putting in place community owned functional structures that would play catalytic role of promoting peace and

reconciliation in the community. Thus ARLPI has subsequently formed 61 Peace Committees in the Districts of Gulu, Kitgum & Pader, with each committee composed of nine members. The main function of the peace committees is to prepare the communities to become forgiving; to receive and re-integrate formerly abducted children from captivity into the society. There is now greater acceptance of these people and their being involved in child captive returnee programme.

- *Technical capacity* – to measure up to the roles of Peace Committee, ARLPI provided training for Peace Animators (61) and members of the Peace Committee, in group dynamics and facilitation in responding to conflict (negotiation, mediation and mediation services and reconciliation process). This has created a better understanding and trust amongst the community in seeing their own people involved in promoting peace.

4.0 Challenges

- Lack of trust by both Government of Uganda and LRA has made the peace process quite complicated and difficult to pursue.
- The long war has left virtually all the people in this region frustrated, traumatized bitter and hopeless
- The risk of being caught in crossfire when involved in mediation is very high.
- The expiry of amnesty law casts doubt on the peace process., and is worsened by the proposed Terrorism Act.
- The blanket labeling of the Acholi community as rebel sympathizers has instilled fear in most Acholi. Hence they have become inactive in peace-building activities
- Spillage of insurgency in the neighboring districts in Lango and Teso sub-regions have led to inter-tribal sentiments and likely to degrade to tribal conflict and fertile ground for genocide.
- Formation of militia forces (militarizing the community), for civilian protection is undermining the peace efforts
- Government's carrot and stick policy (pursuing military as well as "peaceful dialogue") undermines the very principle of peaceful negotiation.

- A greater call for an active role of the international community in the conflict resolution is urgently required.

5.0 Way forward

- Promotion of genuine peaceful dialogue between the Government and the LRA. This should be preceded by immediate cessation of hostilities to create space for peace building. Active involvement of the international community in this noble call is imperative.
- Duration of the Amnesty Law should be extended to provide hope for rebels who might want to pursue peaceful means. Government should stay or repeal the Terrorism Act in order for the LRA to gain confidence that they would not be harassed when they return. This has been a call by the people in the north, unfortunately falling onto the deaf ears of some legislators.
- There is urgent need to declare N. Uganda a disaster area, & draw international attention and support to the plight of its people.
- Government of Uganda must provide security and protection to all its people, and stop use of militia forces, as it is likely to breed inter-tribal sentiments and likely to lead to genocide.
- Post conflict intervention should be developed and immediately implemented in terms of resettlements, food security, education, social services, peaceful co-existence, psychosocial support and other development sectors.

6.0 Conclusion

ARLPI has identified itself with the suffering in the NU. The case of the suffering of northern children is of great pain to us for even Jesus associated Himself with the children. In this context, we as religious leaders spent four nights in the cold on the streets of Gulu with the children. We are concern that their living and sleeping on the street is a worry to all parents and leaders of the world since these are the new generations of NU. The presence of ARLPI in the N. Uganda theatre of conflict is HOPE IN THE STORM