



ACHOLI RELIGIOUS LEADERS PEACE INITIATIVE

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Response of Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI) to the “ Lord's Resistance Army Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act of 2009”

For over two decades, war between the Lords Resistance Army (LRA) and the Government of Uganda (GoU) has ravaged the region of north and north-eastern Uganda causing great suffering among the civilian population. Over the last number of years, the conflict has unfortunately spread to the Southern Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo and Central African Republic. While several methods have been employed to bring and end to the conflict, all have failed to reach their goal of realizing peace.

To address this issue the “*Lord's Resistance Army Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act of 2009*” was introduced to the U.S. Senate on May 19th, 2009, detailing the way in which the United States wishes to engage with the conflict.

We the Acholi Religious Leaders Initiative (ARLPI) who have been tirelessly working to bring about sustainable peace and reconciliation throughout the region, wish to express our gratitude for the continued interest and support the U.S. has shown towards ending the suffering of those affected. Their support to initiatives such as the Juba Peace Talks and the provision of humanitarian aid during the course of the conflict has not gone unnoticed. Such contributions have significantly improved the conditions in the region.

Of particular concern in the bill however is *Section 4: Requirement of a Regional Strategy for Disarming the LRA*. This section implies that a military offensive may be immanent. The military option has been explored numerous times in the past, notably Operation North (1991), Operation Iron Fist (2002) and Operation Lightning Thunder (2008-2009).

Experience shows that despite such attempts to end the conflict, only dialogue can be attributed to the relative calm experienced in Northern Uganda since July of 2006. Military strategies launched against the LRA have time and again led to severe reprisal attacks on the innocent civilian community as illustrated by the recent 900 civilian deaths during Operation Lightning Thunder.

Not only has the cost of the military option been expensive regarding the loss of human life, the financial implications of war are also immense. The large sums of money required to carry out war drain the resources needed to bring about development and reconstruction of affected areas.

Therefore ARLPI would like to put forth the following recommendations which we feel will help to bring stability and development to the region:

- When it comes to *Section 4* of the bill, it should be the highest priority for any

intervention to ensure the protection of civilians. Such a strategy however needs to be well thought through as in the past such has been done through the arming of civilian security organs which has led to further insecurity. Weapons provided to these organs often become integrated into the community and has allowed the LRA to increase their military strength during subsequent raids.

- It must be acknowledged that there are numerous groups which are causing insecurity throughout the region. While the LRA is one said group, any strategy that is put in place must also address the other negative forces working in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, and Uganda who pose a threat to stability.
- As the conflict has transformed into a regional issue, diplomatic engagement with regional stakeholders, namely those from Democratic Republic of Congo, Southern Sudan, Central African Republic, and Uganda is integral so that the needs and concerns of all affected are adequately addressed.
- Furthermore, we feel that not all non-violent strategies have been explored adequately. While some have put forward that dialogue has failed, we argue that there were certain factors such as the stick and carrot approach, vested interests, presumptions, and the lack of coordination and communication between the LRA, GoU, and the mediating parties which did not provide a fruitful environment for dialogue to take place.
- Time and again, issues of spoilers both regionally and internationally have played a role in frustrating any attempts at peace. For any regional strategy to be successful, we feel that such spoilers need to be investigated, made known if found guilty, and held accountable for their actions in the interest of sustainable peace.
- It has been observed that past development programs in Northern Uganda have failed to make an impact on the ground due to various factors such as corruption. This raises concerns over PRDP implementation. If termination of assistance is realized as suggested in *Section 6, A & D* of the bill, an alternative plan needs to be put into place to ensure that support is maintained to the affected civilian population to prevent them from once again being victims due to the actions of others.
- Regarding *Section 7* of the bill, any transitional justice mechanism which seeks to foster reconciliation must ensure participation all those who have been engaged in the conflict, including the LRA, GoU, and the civilian population. This is to ensure accountability for all actions taken during the conflict as well as to illustrate the commitment of all to the process of healing our community.

In conclusion, we applaud the commitment of the bill to bring about stability and development in the region. However, we as the Acholi religious leaders whose primary concern is the preservation of human life, advocate for dialogue and other non-violent strategies to be employed so that long term sustainable peace may be realized. Let us learn from the past experiences where we have seen that violence only breeds more violence.

Sincerely,

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