



THE ACHOLI RELIGIOUS LEADERS PEACE INITIATIVE

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QUEST FOR RECONCILIATION :

The Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative's Pursuit of Sustainable Peace

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Introduction:

It was a day of celebration. Six former commanders of the LRA had returned home after years of fighting in the bush and were undergoing the traditional Acholi cleansing ceremony of 'nyono tong gweno' (stepping on the egg). One by one the men stepped on the raw egg, a key act to begin the process of reconciliation as participation is a symbol of the perpetrators acknowledgement of wrongdoing and desire to be a part of the community again. Sounds of jubilation filled the air as family and community members wrapped their arms around the returnees and extended greetings of welcome.

Speeches were made from various community leaders thanking the former LRA commanders for returning and encouraging them to become productive members of society.

It was then time for a member of the Ugandan government and the representative of the UPDF to speak. Unlike the people before them, they began to encourage people not to believe in the Juba Peace Talks and labeled those who continue to dialogue with Joseph Kony as "fools". The light and airy mood of the event quickly changed to uneasiness as they continued to express their desire to "finish off Kony once and for all". While the occasion was meant to promote peace and reconciliation, the event had quickly been transformed to promote un-forgiveness and war.

It then came time for the Catholic Archbishop John Baptist Odama, the chairman of the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI) to speak. Sensing the hurt the young returnees felt from the previous statements made, he began to express words of encouragement. It was then when it happened. This man, an Archbishop of great respect and power, knelt down in the red African dirt in his white cassock and said to the former LRA commanders, "if in any way my contribution [to ending the war] was not sufficient or enough to make you better, please forgive me." The moment was powerful, and the crowd silent. Through his actions and few words, the Archbishop communicated collective responsibility, acceptance, hope and a desire to move forward for peace.¹

Birth of an Organization:

Religious leaders have always played a significant role in providing spiritual support to those which they lead during times of conflict. However, the relentless suffering of the Acholi people as a result of over two decades of war stirred the hearts of the religious leaders to explore what more could be done practically to bring an end to such hardship.

In 1997, the then Anglican Bishop of northern Uganda Macleod Baker Ochola II called for Catholic, Anglican, and later Muslim leaders to attend a series of meetings to discuss and pray together for the purpose of seeking an end to the war. Stirred to action, the religious leaders decided to organize a peace rally in August of 1997 where they released a joint message requesting the LRA to stop its violent campaigns against civilians and called for the government to enter into mediated dialogue with the rebels. In September of the same year, they then issued a "strongly worded publication denouncing the UPDF's attempts to force villagers into the displacement camps."² Out of these initiatives, ARLPI was birthed. Realizing that the voices of the religious leaders are stronger when working together, ARLPI was officially inaugurated in February of 1998 bringing together religious leaders from the four major religions in northern Uganda, Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox and Muslim.

¹ Traditional Cleansing Ceremony, Acholi Palace: Gulu, Uganda, September 23, 2008

² (Father Rodriguez, Carlos. 'The Role of Religious Leaders.' Ed: Lucima, Okello. Protracted Conflict, Elusive Peace: Initiative to end the Violence in Northern Uganda. Conciliation Resources: London, UK, 2002. pg 59).

Guided by the intrinsic values and teachings from these four respective religions, ARLPI took on the mission to work for sustainable peace and development by transforming conflict using the path of nonviolence throughout northern Uganda. As stated by the Catholic Archbishop Odama, “the world has torn us apart; it is our job to bring it together.”³

To achieve this goal, ARLPI has instituted various structures including the core membership of religious leaders, a secretariat who organizes and implements day to day activities, and numerous peace committees consisting of over 700 volunteers at both the district and sub-county level who are trained and mandated to resolve issues arising at the grassroots level, promoting unity and reconciliation.

While ARLPI has always incorporated women into all their structures, they have recently recognized that women have been most negatively affected by the war yet largely ignored when it comes to rebuilding their communities. To help fill this gap, the organization implemented a Women Empowerment Strategy (WES) in 2005 to ensure that the Acholi grassroot women are engaged in all areas of peacebuilding and reconciliation. This program seeks to empower women by building their capacity to play active leadership roles in bringing about healing and stability within their communities.

For over 10 years ARLPI has been relentlessly working to build a culture of holistic peace throughout Uganda through the implementation of various activities such as workshops, trainings, memorial prayers, and advocacy campaigns. For their commitment and steadfast labor for peace and reconciliation, ARLPI has received international awards such as the Niwano Peace Prize (Japan, 2004), the Paul Carus Award (Spain, 2004), and most recently the Peace Award for United Religions Initiative (URI) Africa (Ethiopia, 2008).

Reconciling the Religious Divide:

One of the greatest accomplishments which ARLPI has achieved was to unite and reconcile the various religious traditions that exist within northern Uganda. For decades suspicion, resentment, and even outright hate between the followers of different faiths has existed due to the politicization of religion. While there has been a history of division among the Anglican and Catholic churches in Uganda, perhaps the greatest hurdle to religious unity was regarding Islamic-Christian relations.

During the brutal reign of Idi Amin, many Christians had been victims of violence and persecution by the leaders attempt to promote Islam throughout Uganda. As a result, great misunderstandings arose and many believed Islam to be a religion characterized by violence and oppression. When Amin’s regime was ousted in 1979, a number of individuals engaged in revenge attacks against the Muslim community driving them from their homesteads resulting in further division.⁴

While in the past specific religious groups had been targets of violence, the war in Acholiland did not discriminate and all suffered greatly despite their religious affiliation. Having recognized this, the religious leaders put aside their differences to labor towards peace for all rather than promoting their individual faiths. Out of this commitment ARLPI formed its motto, ‘Kacel pi Kuc’ (Together for peace).

As the religious leaders worked together, trust slowly formed as a result of their consistency to honor and respect each others beliefs. By dialoging over various issues, longstanding misconceptions about the

³ Archbishop Odama, Interview on Leadership. ARLPI Head Office, Gulu, Uganda, July 28/08

⁴ All Hajji Sheik Musa Khalil, Interview on Reconciliation, ARLPI Head Office, Gulu, Uganda, Oct 21/08)

'other' became shattered strengthening the relationship between them. This act of reconciliation is widely respected by the community and can be largely attributed to ARLPI's success in transforming conflict. One traditional leader stated, "ARLPI is an example of how people who have differences can be unified and come together to eradicate future conflict."⁵

Although ARLPI has largely been successful in foraging a spirit of unity among the different religious institutions in northern Uganda, some tensions still exist especially at the grassroots level. In that past, some lower level religious leaders have used ARLPI activities to evangelize resulting in tensions among the leaders of different faiths. This called for ARLPI to better define the roles and responsibilities of their peace volunteers and illustrated that more teaching and guidance by the top religious leaders was needed to ensure unity for the sake of peace is maintained.

Giving a Voice to the Voiceless:

Motivated by the voice of the people, ARLPI has tirelessly sought to bring the needs of the war affected community into light by engaging in various advocacy campaigns and lobbying with various actors at the national, regional, and international stage. Their constant interaction with those at the grassroots level has equipped them to cultivate understanding regarding the issues which affect people's day to day lives.

While ARLPI has carried out many advocacy campaigns on behalf of the Acholi people, the role they played with bringing the plight of the night commuters (invisible children) to international attention was paramount.

For years the religious leaders watched as young children would walk long distances to spend the night sleeping on the streets of town centres which offered more protection from the threat of abductions by the LRA. In response, the religious leaders decided that they would leave the comfort of their homes and join the children in solidarity to spend the night in the Gulu town bus park. For four nights the leaders made the humbling journey carrying their blanket and sleeping mat with them. Remembering the moment, All Hajji Shiek Musa Khalil, ARLPI's current vice-chairman stated that "the children were speaking a message to us and we said we must go and join them so we can hear them. Their interactions with the children prompted three pertinent questions which needed to be answered. Why are the LRA targeting children? Why isn't the government protecting them? And, where is the rest of the world? Don't they care about us?"⁶

Attracting immense media attention both nationally and internationally, for the first time many around the world began to learn about the war in northern Uganda and the affect it was having on the innocent civilian population. Many humanitarian agencies and governments from all over the world responded with providing much needed support such as temporary shelters, blankets, and food for the children who commuted each night.⁷

⁵ Rwot Mol, Interview on ARLPI Community Involvement, Kitgum, Uganda, Aug 1/08. Throughout consultative meetings with community leaders in the districts of Pader and Kitgum, numerous individuals described ARLPI leaders as role models due to their spirit of unity among the religious leaders from various faith backgrounds. They are widely referred to as individuals who not only preach reconciliation, but live it out in their everyday lives thus creating great trust and among the people.

⁶ All Hajji Sheik Musa Khalil, Interview on Reconciliation, ARLPI Head Office, Gulu, Uganda, Oct 21/08.

⁷ While almost 2 years of relative peace have allowed the practice of night commuting to end, many of the actors who provided humanitarian aid and support during this time have remained. For many of these organizations, it was their first time engaging with northern Uganda.

Before the event, the media had largely ignored the humanitarian situation in the north. The newly found interest in the conflict caused the central government to become very irate with the religious leaders and felt that they were trying to undermine their authority. This anger intensified as the leaders were invited to speak with various world leaders and international news agencies informing them of the situation. As a result, the government labeled them “World Trekkers of Liars.”⁸ Despite the attack on their character, the religious leaders pressed forward using the truth as their weapon of defense.

Building Bridges:

The first official event held by ARLPI was “Bedo Piny pi Kuc (sitting down for peace) which drew over 150 Acholi who discussed in-depth issues surrounding the LRA insurgency and possible strategies to end it. Out of the discussions, it was concluded that the war could not be won through military action and the goal was set to work towards having the conflicting parties enter into mediated dialogue.”⁹

Convincing the warring parties to enter into talks proved to be a very difficult task for the religious leaders as both sides wanted to solely employ the military option to conclude the war. For not supporting the government’s plan, the religious leaders were labeled as ‘rebel sympathizers’ by the government.¹⁰ However, after receiving much pressure both from home and abroad, the Ugandan government accepted to give the religious leaders two weeks to try to make contact with LRA leadership in order to bring them to the table.

Given that communication with the LRA was extremely limited, it was to everyone’s surprise that within 10 days, ARLPI obtained direct access to the rebels. While in a meeting at his residence in Gulu, LRA second in command Vincent Otti called Archbishop Odama directly and stated, “we want you to mediate between the government and the LRA.”¹¹

Many feared meeting with the LRA as they were known to be unpredictable and extremely volatile in nature. Despite any trepidation, Archbishop Odama stated, “for the sake of peace, I’m ready to go into the bush” and the religious leaders along with some local traditional leaders began their trek into the bush without escorts. They then met with LRA leadership for three days forming the beginning of a relationship which would lead to mediated dialogue between the parties who had greatly distanced themselves in the past.

ARLPI continued to connect the two conflicting parties and acted as a confidence building bridge by delivering exchange letters. Along with the Presidential Peace Team, ARLPI arranged a dialogue meeting between the government and the LRA in Pajule, Pader district in 2003. Unfortunately however, the meeting was quickly halted due to heavy bombardment on the venue by UPDF troops taking place over a three day period. This major setback resulted in the LRA accusing ARLPI as being used by the government as bait for killing them and greatly challenged the trust which had previously been formed. Despite this hurdle, the religious leaders clarified their position and the LRA once again accepted to

⁸ Catholic Archbishop Odama, Consultative Meeting with British High Commission, Archbishops Residence, Gulu. July 30, 2008.

⁹ Archbishop Odama, Interview on Leadership. ARLPI Head Office, Gulu, Uganda, July 28, 2008.

¹⁰ Fr Julius, Consultative Meeting with British High Commission, Archbishops Residence, Gulu, Uganda, July 30, 2008.

¹¹ Archbishop Odama, Consultative Meeting with British High Commission Archbishops Residence, Gulu. July 30, 2008.

listen. It was then decided that it be best for an outside party to resume the role of mediator in order to safeguard the integral relationship which had been established.¹²

Sadly, despite the progress that was being made the government decided to once again take military action against the LRA in an effort to eliminate the rebel group once and for all. This greatly troubled ARLPI as once again they witnessed that such actions were resulting in the LRA taking revenge upon the civilian population. They also grew deeply concerned for the numerous abducted individuals who would not be able to return home as a result of being killed by UPDF troops. In response, the religious leaders continued to advocate strongly for the parties to enter into a ceasefire and resume dialogue.

When the two parties finally came back to the table to talk in 2006, the religious leaders played a role in advising and observing the talks. As trusted individuals, they have been called upon by LRA leadership numerous times to clarify certain issues pertaining to the agreements over the last two years. While the recent talks has also been wracked with challenges which has prevented the final agreement to be signed, it has largely been seen by ARLPI as a success for it has led to a period of relative peace throughout northern Uganda.

Throughout the peace talks, many controversial and antagonistic statements were made by both the government and the LRA making relations tense and causing further division. Many have called upon the religious leaders to respond to such statements however they have always refused to speak to what is not confirmed to safeguard the truth which is so often lost in times of war. While there has been great division even within the government about how to resolve the conflict, ARLPI has never wavered from their position that mediated dialogue is the best method to end the war and continues to believe in the Juba Peace Talks. In response to those critical of the peace talks, Archbishop Odama stated, "I will be a fool for peace. Forward ever, backward never."¹³

Amnesty Act:

Not seeing an end to the war in sight and having witnessed that military action only exacerbated the suffering of the people, ARLPI began to advocate for the implementation of an amnesty act to work as an incentive for LRA combatants to defect.

The religious leaders believe that amnesty is an important tool in ending the war because most LRA were abducted and did not join the fighting voluntarily. The acts they committed were often carried out under the order of top commanders and the only way to ensure their daily survival was to comply. To punish such individuals when they return would only result in their being victimized twice.¹⁴

The government introduced an Amnesty Bill in 1998, however like the country's previous Amnesty Statute of 1987, it sought to exclude certain offenses such as rape, genocide, murder, and kidnapping from the act. However, given the nature of the war in Northern Uganda, few returnees would be eligible to receive this form of amnesty rendering such an act as ineffective.¹⁵

¹² Father Rodriguez, Carlos. 'The Role of Religious Leaders.' Ed: Lucima, Okello. Protracted Conflict, Elusive Peace: Initiative to end the Violence in Northern Uganda. Conciliation Resources: London, UK, 2002. pg 59.

¹³ Archbishop Odama, Speech Presented at Traditional Cleansing Ceremony, Acholi Palace, Gulu, Uganda, Sept 23, 2008.

¹⁴ Bishop Ochola. Interview on Amnesty, ARLPI Head Office, Gulu, Uganda, Oct 13, 2008.

¹⁵ Afako, Barney. Reconciliation and Justice. Ed: Lucima, Okello. Protracted Conflict, Elusive Peace: Initiative to end the Violence in Northern Uganda. Conciliation Resources: London, UK, 2002. pg 65.

Recognizing this, the religious leaders began to make consultations with Acholi at both the grassroots level and within the Diaspora to determine their aspirations. Taking what they had learned through these meetings, in 2000 ARLPI produced a memorandum to the government rejecting partial amnesty and put forward a draft for the creation of an act that would grant blanket amnesty to all participants of the war.”

¹⁶

In response to the draft, the government was initially quite resistant to making such amendments as they felt the top leadership of the LRA should be prosecuted for the role which they have played in the war. ARLPI then traveled to Kampala and labored hard to convince parliament to accept. The government decided that they too would investigate to determine the level of support for such an act was. Finding that in fact the people were largely in favor of the proposed bill, in Jan, 2000 the government introduced the new amnesty act which consisted of a large amount of the draft which had been written by ARLPI.¹⁷ In a recent press conference regarding the surrender of top LRA commanders, the Ugandan President Museveni reiterated ARLPI's role in the adoption of the current amnesty act by stating, “Although I did not believe in forgiving wrong-doers, Archbishop Odama of Gulu Diocese and Bishop Baker Ochola of Kitgum Diocese convinced him of the need for forgiveness in Acholi.”¹⁸

The religious leaders have also played a significant role in the implementation of the amnesty act. The bill allows former combatants to report to any religious leader upon returning home. Returnees are also given the option to report to various community structures such as the local government and UPDF barracks. Given that religious leaders are trusted and known for their integrity, some returnees refuse to report to such places without the accompaniment of a religious leader. When asking one returnee as to why he choose to report to a religious leader, he said “I trust the religious leaders. I feared that if I might report to the barracks or to the government, I would be killed.”¹⁹ ARLPI structures at the sub-county level have therefore played a significant role in helping individuals return to their communities both within Uganda and Sudan.²⁰

While over 20,000 former rebels have reported to the Amnesty Commission to date, great obstacles have existed which has hindered the program and thus the process of reconciliation. Perhaps the greatest hurdle was informing those within the LRA of the amnesty act. Since the rebel group was scattered in isolated areas throughout the region, communication was a challenge. This opened the doors for manipulation by the LRA leadership as they were able to control what messages their troops received. Radio was used as the primary means of transmission but some returnees reported being prohibited from listening to the radio and only heard about the act through their fellow comrades.

While the Amnesty Commission awards returnees identical return packages regardless of rank, some top LRA commanders who have returned have received significantly more through deals made independently

¹⁶ Afako, Barney. Reconciliation and Justice. Ed: Lucima, Okello. Protracted Conflict, Elusive Peace: Initiative to end the Violence in Northern Uganda. Conciliation Resources: London, UK, 2002. pg 66.

¹⁷ All Hajji Sheik Musa Khalil, Interview on Reconciliation, ARLPI Head Office, Gulu, Uganda, Oct 21, 2008.

¹⁸ Vision Reporter. Odhiambo Won't Face World Court. New Vision Newspaper. Wednesday, February 11, 2009.

¹⁹ LRA Returnee. Focus Group Discussion on ARLPI Community Involvement. Pader, Uganda, Sept 19, 2008.

²⁰ Some who have escaped from the LRA were abducted from Sudan however reported within Uganda. ARLPI peace committees have helped to arrange and support the return of these individuals to their original places of origin.

with the government resulting in a lot of animosity among survivors.²¹ While it is widely seen as important to give returnees 'start up' items to help facilitate their reintegration thus preventing them from returning to combat, those who have been subject to atrocities struggle with accepting the policy as they themselves have not received compensation for what they have lost.

Another challenge is that while amnesty is seen as compatible with the existing Acholi traditional system of justice and dispute resolution, the way the act was presented has led to some confusion about what amnesty really is.²² Since the Acholi word used for amnesty, 'kica' also means forgiveness, some argue that amnesty promotes impunity and does not adequately address the suffering of the survivor.

Unlike the purpose of amnesty in South Africa which was to encourage truth telling after the end of the apartheid era, the main goal of amnesty in Uganda was to encourage the fighters to give up their arms and return home. However, for reconciliation to occur, those who have committed offences must enter into dialogue with the survivor and offer an acknowledgement of the wrongs they have committed. This is seen as important as, "acknowledgement through hearing one another's stories validates experience and feelings and represents the first step toward the restoration of the person and relationship."²³

Currently there is no provision for a returnee neither to disclose his or her involvement in the conflict nor to even interact with those whom he or she committed wrongs against. While amnesty may encourage some to defect from fighting, the religious leaders therefore know that it alone is not sufficient in bringing about reconciliation but instead is a tool which can be used to help encourage the process.

Defining Reconciliation:

The building of right relationships is the centerpiece of ARLPI's labor to bring sustainable peace to Uganda. Traditionally, Acholi values are people centered and based on relationship as the essence of life.²⁴ For centuries they have believed that all individuals can be reformed making the death penalty unheard of as a clan would accept collective responsibility if one of their members committed a wrong.²⁵

The process of reconciliation which ARLPI believes in is an "over-arching process that includes the key instruments of justice, truth, healing, and reparation for moving from a divided past into a shared future."²⁶ It does not mean forgiveness as both forgiveness and reconciliation can exist without the other. However, the majority of Acholi feel that it is only through forgiveness that problems can be solved."²⁷ Reconciliation can therefore be seen as a coming together and building of relationships which foster trust to enhance interdependence.

²¹ Ocitti, Grace. Presentation on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration. ARLPI Juba Peace Talks Reflection Workshop: Ker Kal Kwaro, Gulu, Uganda, Sept 10-12th, 2008.

²² Allen, Tim. War and Justice in Northern Uganda: An Assessment of the International Criminal Courts Intervention. Crisis States Research Centre & Development Studies Institute London School of Economics: London, UK, Feb, 2005. pg 95.

²³ Lederach, John Paul, Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies. USIP Press: Washington, DC, 1997. pg 26.

²⁴ John Baptist Odama. The Reconciliation Process within the Acholi Tribe in Northern Uganda. Dharma World. July/August, 2004.

²⁵ Zachary Lomo and Lucy Hovil, Behind the Violence: Causes, Consequences and the Search for Solutions to the War in Northern Uganda, Refugee Law Project Working Paper No.11, February, 2004.

²⁶ Van der Mark, Iris. Reconciliation: Bridging Theory to Practice. Centre for Justice and Reconciliation: The Hague, Netherlands, 2007. pg 8.

To meet the dynamic and complex needs of Uganda to achieve this, ARLPI has been working at bringing about reconciliation primarily at four levels: 1) the individual, 2) clan, 3) regional, and 4) national level.

Reconciliation at the Individual Level:

The conditions and circumstances the Acholi people have had to endure over the last 2 decades of war have made the environment ripe for various conflicts. Not only did people have to endure through abductions and violence but the cramped and squalor conditions of the IDP camps have created great division within communities. To make matters worse, as former LRA combatants begin to return home, people are faced with the challenge of living side by side with those who have committed great atrocities against them.

At the sub-county level, ARLPI's peace committees have been working hard to transform these conflicts non-violently through sensitizations, trainings, mediations, peace activities and events. Being respected community individuals, they are often the first to be called when a conflict arises within communities. Since they also serve the grassroots people they are aware of their community needs and are in a position to influence people to change.

Although individual conflicts arise, ARLPI ensures that all its efforts are communal in nature. In defense of this approach, Bishop Ochola stated, "people live as communities and not as individuals therefore the approach to reconciliation should be communal as well."²⁸ In collective cultures like the Acholi, it is therefore imperative that all peacebuilding and reconciliatory efforts involve the community at large as they also play an important role in holding each other accountable to the solution which has been agreed upon as well as mitigating future conflicts that may arise.

For example, when a young child was killed after being hit by a motorcycle, Rev. Alfred Odoch, the chairman of ARLPI's Sub-county Religious Leaders Peace Committee in Lamogi was contacted to mediate between the driver and the child's family. Traditionally, when a death occurs through an accident, compensation is paid to the family of the deceased. However, in this case, the family declined the compensation citing it did not align with their Christian values. The driver's family interpreted the refusal as an act of unforgiveness and a desire to take revenge causing great division between the families. To address the issue, Rev. Odoch brought representatives from both families together to discuss the conflict. After each individual was given an opportunity to talk if desired, they parted ways to discuss the situation as a family. Another meeting was then held where an agreement was made with the families accepting to exchange money to help pay for the funeral arrangements and a commitment to "peaceful and harmonious coexistence."²⁹

ARLPI has also sought to foster healing at the individual level by building monuments and organizing peace prayers at massacre sites in order to give the survivors an opportunity to tell their stories. During these events, both survivor and returnee stand side by side honoring the memory of those who lost their lives. This process is thought to help restore the dignity of the people through by acknowledging that the atrocity occurred and demonstrating that they did not deserve what happened to them. It is a moment to mourn together and stand in solidarity as a community.

²⁷ Allen, Tim. War and Justice in Northern Uganda: An Assessment of the International Criminal Courts Intervention. Crisis States Research Centre & Development Studies Institute London School of Economics: London, UK, Feb, 2005. pg 69.

²⁸ Bishop Ochola. Interview on Amnesty, ARLPI Head Office, Gulu, Uganda, Oct 13, 2008.

²⁹ Ochan, George, ARLPI Activities Report. Gulu, Uganda, July 15, 2008.

As relative peace is being realized in northern Uganda, it has also brought with it challenges of its own regarding the carrying out of peacebuilding and reconciliation activities. Those affected by the war are in survival mode to meet their basic human needs. As more and more leave the IDP camps to return to their new villages, it has become very difficult to mobilize people to participate in activities that promote peace and reconciliation. Those that do attend often request some sort of compensation for their time as aid organizations have fostered a culture of dependence. This has proven to be a great hindrance in the work that ARLPI undertakes while working with limited resources.

Reconciliation between Clans:

While conflicts certainly existed between clans prior to the war, the return and resettlement of the Acholi population to their original homesteads has increased significantly as a result of land conflict. A recent report has stated, “the majority of land in northern Uganda is held by customary tenure. People are ‘custodians’ rather than owners of land. But to function as it should, the system of customary tenure is reliant on social cohesion and stable family units. It has difficulty accommodating the breakdown in social order, the greater number of children born out of wedlock, and the increase in cohabitation that conflict and displacement have produced.”³⁰

In the same report, an elderly man at Acholibur camp said, “You may have lived on the land for 60 years and when you return somebody else is digging there. It can end in fighting and someone getting killed.”³¹

In order to address land conflicts, numerous formal structures have been implemented but have been largely criticized as being inefficient and corrupt. As a result, many who are involved in land disputes contact the informal structures such as the traditional and religious leaders. However, the approaches and efforts of these different institutions are for the most part un-coordinated causing prolonged conflicts in the end. For example, while two clans originally approved of having ARLPI mediate the land conflict between their two clans in Amuru district, one party did not agree with the solution and sought to then take their case to the local courts. Unfortunately the conflict escalated to the point where an elderly man of one clan was killed by the other for digging on the disputed land. From this lesson, ARLPI now seeks to work side by side with government and traditional leaders so that conflicts can be addressed more quickly and efficiently in order to prevent its escalation to violence.

Reconciliation at the Regional Level:

According to Monsignor Matthew Ojara, an ARLPI core member, “a true religious experience in the process of peacebuilding opens the door and enables a person to go beyond the confines of his or her group, tribe, region, nation, and even personal identity in order to embrace others.”³² However, far too often conflicts within Africa have fallen along these lines creating much distrust between many regions. Sadly the war in northern Uganda has been no different.

Given that the LRA is largely made up of people of Acholi, many people have come to view the entire group of people as “warist” in nature as well as supporters of the LRA. As the conflict has flowed into non-Acholi regions such as Teso, Lango, West-Nile, and even other countries like Sudan, many have

³⁰ Oxfam International, From Emergency to Recovery, Oxfam Briefing Paper, September 2008, pg 12.

³¹ Oxfam International, From Emergency to Recovery, Oxfam Briefing Paper, September 2008, pg 12.

³² Monsignor Ojara, Matthew. Reconciliation: The Way Forward. GUSCO Peace Centre, Gulu, Uganda. December 9th-10th, 2004. pg 10.

blamed the Acholi for their plight resulting in division and even counter violence. To address this concern, ARLPI has organized exchange visits with leaders to break down these stereotypes and bring about understanding through demonstrating that all have also suffered during the war regardless of their tribe. ARLPI has also engaged in cross-border dialogue meetings with Sudan in order to help repair the relationship that has been damaged as a result of their respective roles in the conflict.

Another conflict that has for years added to the destabilization of the region is the seasonal migration of the pastoralist Karamajong (Jie) into Pader district. This conflict is often accompanied by the raiding of cattle and looting against the Acholi of this region and as a result, the two groups have found themselves embittered into a cycle of violence affecting the entire population. To mitigate the conflict, ARLPI organized the Acholi-Jie Peace Dialogue and Reconciliation Process consisting of numerous meetings between the two tribes to foster understanding and a commitment to resolving the conflict non-violently. From November 2000 to May 2001, both sides continued to dialogue resulting in a reduction of violence during the following dry season.

Today with coordination of the Pader NGO Forum (make note), ARLPI continues to work towards reconciling Acholi-Karamajong relations. However, recently the government has adopted a policy of disarmament in an effort to reduce the number of violent ambushes and raiding in the region. The government policy therefore prohibits organizations such as ARLPI to engage with the Karamajong without their approval which has greatly hindered the dialogue process as a consensus on how best to deal with the matter has not been agreed upon among all stakeholders.

Reconciliation at the National Level:

In an effort to neutralize the LRA, the Ugandan Government The people of the Acholi sub-region were given 48 hours to leave their homes and move into internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. Any individual who did not obey were thought of as rebel collaborators and faced being killed or bombed by the UPDF. While the camps were thought to be temporary, people were forced to endure through squalor conditions where disease was rampant. Many individuals lost their lives and have become angry and bitter with the central governments failure to uphold their moral responsibility to protect the people whom it was elected to lead.

According to James Nyeko, the Programme Coordinator of ARLPI, this distrust for the government has been exacerbated by the government stating that the war was a regional conflict calling the Acholi, “grasshoppers in a bottle.”³³ Such comments have only increased the level of distrust among the Acholi towards the government rather than building their confidence in government institutions.

In order to address the disparity and isolation felt by the Acholi people, the government has designed a new strategy to encourage peace and development in northern Uganda called the Peace and Recovery Development Plan (PRDP). However, the plan has been largely criticized as being too vague and unrealistic as it seeks to cover over 40 districts, many who were not greatly affected from LRA activities.

Of particular concern is that, “the government does not accept any degree of responsibility for the marginalization of the North which raises concerns about how the recovery effort will address the specific needs and grievances of the Acholi people.”³⁴

³³ Nyeko, James, Consultative Meeting with the British High Commission. Archbishops Residence: Gulu, Uganda, July 30, 2008.

³⁴ Oxfam International, From Emergency to Recovery, Oxfam Briefing Paper, September 2008, pg 19.

Regarding national reconciliation Archbishop Odama stated, that ARLPI's, "desire is to see a united, reconciled, peaceful, and prosperous nation. The north can't live in isolation of the other 65 tribes. We need to work at involving every sector to think in a nationalistic spirit."³⁵ In order to do so, ARLPI has been advocating for the implementation of PRDP in an effort to hold the central government accountable and committed to fulfilling their promises. ARLPI is also in the process of disseminating the agreed upon Agenda Items from the Juba Peace Talks in an effort to ensure that people know what it is that both parties have promised and how their grievances are going to be addressed.

Peace First, Justice Later:

As ARLPI advocated long and hard for blanket amnesty to be implemented, the International Criminal Court (ICC) indictments laid against the top leadership of the LRA were seen by ARLPI as a big blow to the pursuit of peace for northern Uganda. Fr. Carlos Rodriguez, a former member of ARLPI was quoted as saying, "the issuing of international arrest warrants would practically close once and for all the path to peaceful negotiation as a means to end this long war, crushing whatever little progress has been made during these years. Obviously, nobody can convince the leaders of a rebel movement to come to the negotiating table and at the same time tell them that they will appear in courts to be prosecuted."³⁶ This fear has proved to be a reality and how the LRA will face justice appears to be the biggest stumbling block to the signing of the final peace agreement.

While ARLPI respects the ICC's commitment to pursuing justice, the organization feels that it has very little respect for the contextual intricacies and differences which are inherent to each conflict. Anglican Bishop Nelson Onono stated, "There is great arrogance in the international community that the same thing works everywhere."³⁷ Instead of imposing western concepts of justice, ARLPI advocates that methods to achieving justice should be employed from within a culture instead of bowing to international pressure to "do it their way" as 'they' are not the victims. As stated by John Paul Lederach, "in divided societies, standardized formulas and procedures do not work. Peacebuilding must be rooted in and responsive to the experiential and subjective realities shaping peoples perspectives and needs."³⁸

Of particular concern to the religious leaders regarding the ICC, is that it will sacrifice the truth. According to Judith Herman, an expert in trauma healing, "remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are a prerequisite both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims."³⁹ ARLPI believes that the international court would prevent the truth from being known as the system is often largely controlled and censored by lawyers in order to not implicate guilt. Those accused therefore greatly filter what they say in order to ensure that their punishment is minimized. The religious leaders therefore call for a justice mechanism that incorporates an aspect of truth telling in order to foster healing and reconciliation. Emphasizing the importance of relationships and harmonious

³⁵ Archbishop Odama, Consultative Meeting with the British High Commission. Archbishops Residence: Gulu, Uganda, July 30, 2008.

³⁶ Father Rodriguez, Carlos. Quoted by Adam Branch, 'International Justice, Local Injustice: The International Criminal Court in Northern Uganda', Dissent Magazine, Summer 2004.

³⁷ Bishop Onono, Interview By Sierra Leone Delegation, Anglican Diocese: Gulu, Uganda, July 1, 2008.

³⁸ Lederach, John Paul, Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies. USIP Press: Washington, DC, 1997. pg 24.

³⁹ Herman, Judith. Trauma & Recovery. NY,NY: Basic Books, 1992. Pg 1.

co-existence, Bishop Ochola states that, “Justice is achieved when an offender is no viewed as the enemy”⁴⁰

ARLPI’s religious leaders have visited The Hague twice in an effort to inform the ICC of the challenges which the indictments are posing on achieving peace in northern Uganda. Advocating for the dropping of the charges against the top LRA commanders, the religious leaders feel that any outside mechanism will not meet the needs of the victims. Instead, those who have committed the gravest war crimes should be tried by the Special Division of the High Court as agreed by the conflicting parties in the Juba Peace Talks Agenda Three on Accountability and Reconciliation.

While the ICC seeks to provide justice, its failure to investigate the Ugandan government and its structures has made many war-affected people feel that any justice that it might achieve would be one-sided. Bishop Ochola expressed his concerns by stating, “if they just investigate the LRA it will be an injustice to society.”⁴¹ Recently an Amnesty Commission report was released which reported many human rights abuses conducted by the UPDF strengthening the call to hold all parties equally accountable for their actions.⁴² There is great fear however that this one-sided justice will also play out in the Special Division of the High Court as the military has stated that it will apply its own justice system and that any UPDF soldier that has committed crimes will be court-martialed and punished accordingly.⁴³

Religion and Acholi Traditional Practices of Reconciliation:

Included in *Agenda Three: Accountability and Reconciliation of the Juba Peace Talks Agreement*, is the agreement to employ traditional mechanisms to foster reconciliation within communities.⁴⁴ ARLPI has applauded this inclusion as they believe Acholi tradition embodies the principles and practices that are central to support reconciliation.

One such ceremony that is being employed is the act of ‘nyono tong gweno’ (stepping on the egg) as mentioned in the opening of the chapter. “The crushing of the egg shows how the offender has taken away the gift of life which had been given by God. The egg will no longer produce and can never be put back together again.”⁴⁵ Since the atrocities of war and the emotions they illicit are often difficult to communicate verbally, the symbolism of this ritual has the power to act as a reconciliatory tool to help both the survivor and the offender come to a greater understanding of each others experiences. Since it also has the power of acknowledging wrongdoing, it is a step to building trust between conflicting parties as it communicates that the survivor did not deserve to undergo such an experience and puts forth a commitment to not commit such an act again. Regarding this, Bishop Nelson Onono states that the

⁴⁰ Bishop Ochola. Interview on Amnesty, ARLPI Head Office, Gulu, Uganda, Oct 13, 2008.

⁴¹ Adam Branch, ‘International Justice, Local Injustice: The International Criminal Court in Northern Uganda’, Dissent Magazine, Summer 2004.

⁴² Amnesty Commission. Left to Their Own Devices: The Continued Suffering of Victims of the Conflict in Northern Uganda and the Need for Reparations. Amnesty International Publications: London, UK, 2008.

⁴³ Agenda Three: Accountability and Reconciliation, Clause 4.1 communicates that state actors shall be tried under existing mechanisms while non-state actors shall be subjected to the new mechanisms.

⁴⁴ Clause 3: Principles of General Application empowers the use of the traditional justice mechanism known as Mato Oput in Acholi but with modifications to meet the dynamic needs of the conflict as the mechanism was not originally designed for mass atrocities. However, no specific procedures have been spelt out making some concerned as to how it will be implemented.

⁴⁵ Bishop Ochola, Interview on .ARLPI Head Office: Gulu, Uganda, Oct. 6, 2008.

purpose of cleansing "...is to restore and give psychological relief as the offender must testify and voluntarily come back to the community."⁴⁶

Probably the most known and greatly debated Acholi traditional reconciliation ceremony is Mato Oput (Drinking the bitter root). The religious leaders believe that this ceremony has the greatest potential in bringing about reconciliation and unity within communities as it seeks justice in a restorative rather than being punitive in nature. Since it incorporates the aspects of acknowledgement, truth-telling, mediation, compensation and then reintegration, it is seen as a holistic process that although requires a lot of time and effort, addresses the root causes of the conflict. According to Bishop Nelson Onono, "the conflict is thoroughly dealt with first, and then individuals go through the process of Mato Oput."⁴⁷ This is seen as very important so that historical grievances can be addressed in order to mitigate future conflicts which might arise from the parties living side by side within communities.

While ARLPI strongly advocates for traditional mechanisms of reconciliation, this has not always been the case. In the past, religious leaders have been quite cautious and at times even outright opposed traditional cultural practices. In a conference on reconciliation, the Secretary of the Paramount Chief of Acholi, Latim Geresone lamented that the traditional institutions were, "no longer respected by religious institutions who claim their practices to be satanic."⁴⁸

Addressing misunderstandings regarding the acceptance of traditional practices by faith communities, ARLPI has publicly given their approval and encouraged communities to embrace Acholi culture. During a cleansing ceremony of former LRA combatants, Archbishop Odama stated, "On behalf of ARLPI, Rwodi, although there were misunderstandings, take it now from me. We are with you and support this ritual. We now understand its meaning and after consulting religious text see that its basic principle is in uniting people who are torn apart. There are clear rituals in the bible of welcoming and reconciliation therefore we don't view this act as pagan."⁴⁹

Some religious leaders have also gone so far as to relate the symbolism of the bible to the cultural practices used in order to help their followers better understand the purpose of the practice. For example, regarding the slaughtering of the sheep during the Mato Oput process, Bishop Nelson Onono stated, "The blood of the sheep moves close to the blood of Christ."⁵⁰ Given that the blood of Christ was shed to reconcile people to God, such a relation can have a significant impact on fostering acceptance and respect for implementing traditional mechanisms in a country like Uganda whose population are largely religious in belief.

While not all religious leaders fully support all aspects of traditional practices such as sacrifices, respecting the rights of the people, they leave the decision up to the individuals involved as to whether or not they would like to participate in certain ceremonies. For example, when undergoing the reconciliatory process, both cultural and religious leaders are present offering support and guidance to the individuals. While the truth telling and mediation process does not change, the symbolic act which solidifies reconciliation may differ depending on what the parties choose. Parties can decide to solely use religious

⁴⁶ Bishop Onono, Interview By Sierra Leone Delegation, Anglican Diocese: Gulu, Uganda, July 1, 2008.

⁴⁷ Bishop Onono, Interview By Sierra Leone Delegation, Anglican Diocese: Gulu, Uganda, July 1, 2008.

⁴⁸ Geresone, Latim. Reconciliation: The Way Forward. GUSCO Peace Centre, Gulu, Uganda. December 9th-10th, 2004.

⁴⁹ Archbishop Odama, Speech Presented at Traditional Cleansing Ceremony, Acholi Palace: Gulu, Uganda, Sept 23rd/08.

⁵⁰ Bishop Onono, Interview By Sierra Leone Delegation, Anglican Diocese: Gulu, Uganda, July 1, 2008.

rituals such as prayer or employ traditional methods such as Mato Oput. Often times a hybrid is conducted consisting of both religious and cultural practices carried out by the respective leaders within a community. Despite the history of not accepting each other, regardless of what the parties choose, today both the traditional leaders and religious leaders have committed themselves to respecting and supporting one another to ensure that their common dream of peace and reconciliation is realized.

The primarily oral culture of the Acholi has provided great challenges regarding the implementation of traditional practices to foster reconciliation. Documentation of the practices and how they have been used in the past is lacking. This combined with an already eroded culture due to over a decade of camp life, has caused great misunderstandings about the practices. ARLPI is currently working with the Rwodi (cultural chiefs) to help promote and educate the public about the process so that it can effectively be implemented to repair relationships among the people of Uganda.

The Hurdle of Resources and Reparation:

As northern Uganda has been pillaged of its wealth as a result of war, it has been very difficult for individuals to participate in peacebuilding and reconciliation processes that require resources for implementation. With so many victims and perpetrators after decades of violence, the financial implications in carrying out the ceremonies create a significant challenge. Some have even gone so far to say that such practices should not be put into practice as they are burdensome to an already impoverished community. Others have called for the government as well as NGO's to provide the resources, however some critics have stated that such a provision would water down the meaning of the ceremony since the sacrifice of providing the resources "is fundamentally a matter of expressing recognition that what was done was wrong and should never have happened."⁵¹

The lack of resources is also great concern regarding the provision of reparations and compensation to those who have experienced atrocities. Embedded in Acholi tradition, compensation is to be paid by the offender's clan as part of the reconciliatory process. While in the past it was used to pay for the dowry so that the victim's clan could increase its strength through marriage, today in an impoverished society it is often used to help survivors re-build their lives.⁵² Given that the entire region has been wracked with

poverty for over two decades, great debate as to how to effectively fulfill this obligation has arisen.

Traditionally it would be the responsibility of the clan to provide a token of compensation rather than the individual perpetrator. However, in cases like in Atiak and Mucwini where hundreds of people have been massacred by the LRA, Joseph Kony's clan does not have the capacity to provide compensation to each survivor's clan for atrocities committed against them making it a concern as to who will provide the required compensation.

While compensation was once collective, it appears as though the expectations of community members have changed over time. ARLPI consultations with people at the grassroots level have overwhelmingly found that individual compensation in the form of finances is desired to help people rebuild their homes

⁵¹ Govier, Trudy. Taking Wrongs Seriously: Acknowledgement, Reconciliation, and the Politics of Sustainable Peace. Humanity Books: Amherst, NY, 2006. pg 179.

⁵² Traditionally, compensation paid was in the form of a young girl to be given to the other clan for marriage. The offspring resulting from the marriage was therefore seen as a strengthening of the clan as it was believed the greater the number of members, the more powerful a clan. This tradition has changed over time and today the offering of a young girl has been replaced by livestock to help facilitate marriage through the provision of a dowry.

and to be used to acquire other resources such as seeds and equipment for agricultural production.⁵³ While it is apparent that individual compensation is certainly needed to help alleviate the suffering of the people, it is virtually impossible to do so to each of the over 2 million individuals who have been greatly affected by the war.

In response to this dilemma, Bishop Ochola stated, “If the government can, they should provide compensation in the clans place as they also failed to protect the people. This can be in the form of blanket compensation such as the provision of a university, health centre, monument, or other items that will help rehabilitate a community so that they can rise out of their position of poverty.”⁵⁴

Such a stance has been echoed in international law as it states that, “redress should be given in proportion to the gravity of the violation and the harm suffered by victims. If the violation is committed by the state, then it is the state that should provide reparations to the victims. If it was committed by an agent other than the state, than that agent should provide reparations. However, in cases in which the agent in violation cannot or does not do so, the obligation falls to the state.”⁵⁵

Other religious leaders such as Bishop Nelson Onono feel that, compensation should be given collectively except for those who have been most affected by the conflict should receive individual compensation such as those who have been physically maimed by the violence.⁵⁶ He further suggested that such provisions should be from the ICC trust fund which is set up to provide reparations to victims of armed conflict.

Some organizations such as the Gulu NGO Forum fear that collective reparations will fail to reach the primary victims, therefore failing to directly benefit them. They also feel that since it is already the existing responsibility of the government to provide basic infrastructure and services, such provisions should not be mistaken as compensation for atrocities committed.⁵⁷

As one can see from the diversity of opinions, the debate is a complex one. The way in which reparations and compensation is awarded proves to be a sensitive issue as the failure to meet the expectations of victims has the potential of causing more harm and greatly challenges any reconciliation efforts that are implemented.

A Way Forward:

During the two years in which the peace talks have been ongoing, both sides of the conflict have agreed on specific structures and activities which should be implemented in order to bring sustainable peace to Uganda. As people have begun to move on and rebuild their lives, ARLPI recognizes the need for the

⁵³ Snowdon, Wade. Focus Group Discussion on ARLPI Community Involvement. Pader, Kitgum and Amuru, Uganda, August 1-September 19th, 2008.

⁵⁴ Bishop Ochola. Interview on Amnesty, ARLPI Head Office, Gulu, Uganda, Oct 13, 2008.

⁵⁵ Govier, Trudy. Taking Wrongs Seriously: Acknowledgement, Reconciliation, and the Politics of Sustainable Peace. Humanity Books: Amherst, NY, 2006. pg 183.

⁵⁶ Bishop Onono, Interview By Sierra Leone Delegation, Anglican Diocese: Gulu, Uganda, July 1, 2008.

⁵⁷ Lino, Owor Ogora. Presentation on Accountability and Reconciliation. ARLPI Juba Peace Talks Reflection Workshop: Ker Kal Kwaro, Gulu, Uganda, September 10-12, 2008.

immediate implementation of some of the agreements in order to meet the current needs of the community despite the delay in signing of the final agreement.

In an effort to start doing so, ARLPI organized a Juba Reflection Workshop held from September 10-12th, 2008 which consisted of government members, civil society organizations, NGO's, and both the traditional and religious leaders to sit down and collectively lay out the roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder in the implementation of the agreements. However this initiative has not been seen as favorable by all as the LRA representative to the peace talks, Mr. David Matsanga-Nyekorach himself stated that any implementation prior to the final signing would translate into treachery against the LRA and the peace talks. Despite the resistance, out of their desire to see the people uplifted, ARLPI is continuing to push forward and is currently planning another workshop to formally draw up a reconciliation plan based upon Agenda Three: Accountability and Reconciliation of the peace talks.

The religious leaders are aware that reconciliation is not an easy task to achieve and that their greatest work lies ahead. It is apparent that a conflict as complex as the war in northern Uganda requires creative and diverse reconciliatory processes in order to meet the diversity of needs within the affected population. While the success of bringing about reconciliation and long lasting peace in Uganda is uncertain, ARLPI is committed to helping people not to forget the past but instead move forward, working hard to reconcile communities so that a prosperous future can be enjoyed by all.”⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Lanyero Obina, Karima. Interview on Leadership. ARLPI Head Office, Gulu, Uganda, July 28, 2008.