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RE: African Union Summit on Refugees and IDP's: Kampala, October 19th-21st, 2009

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For over a decade, the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI), an interfaith peacebuilding and advocacy organisation has advocated strongly for the dismantling of the camps for the internally displaced throughout northern Uganda.¹ The squalor conditions in the camps characterized by a lack of services, poor sanitation, disease and cramped living spaces robbed the people of northern Uganda of both their dignity and culture. Furthermore, the camps failed to offer the security promised to the people allowing the LRA to attack with greater intensity given the large camp population.² The way in which camps for the internally displaced were handled will forever be a blight on the history of this great nation.

As Uganda prepares to host the African Union Summit in October with the purpose of developing an African solution to dealing with the problem of refugees and the internally displaced, we the Acholi religious leaders who together form ARLPI wish to highlight the northern Ugandan experience of internal displacement. Our purpose is not to point fingers of to lay blame for the situation that ensued, but instead to stir others to use the knowledge to ensure that the needs of those who find themselves in such dire situations are better met.

The Camp Experience:

Despite the forced displacement of almost the entire population of northern Uganda by the GoU in 2002, no humanitarian organisations were mobilized to diminish the effects resulting in substantial suffering and death as a consequence to disease and hunger.

To address this, in 2004 the GoU implemented a national policy for dealing with IDP's which mandated the District Disaster Management Committee (DDMC) of every district to be the lead agency with one male and one female directly from the affected population to be included in its composition. While this was a good first step, sadly large gaps continued to exist between the policy and its implementation and the experience of those in the camps changed little. This has in part been blamed on the lack of resources available to carry out the recommendations.

¹ ARLPI's publication, "Let My People Go," highlighted the plight of people in the camps and informed other ARLPI activities such as the, "Peace is better at home" advocacy campaign.

In 2002, the GoU gave the population 48hrs to move to the camps for the internally displaced.

² The ARLPI report "Let My People Go", based on interviews with 900 IDPs at 24 camps in Gulu District, condemned the inadequacy of the 'protection camps' for IDPs in relation to the provision of food, education, health facilities and sanitation.

It is therefore imperative that every effort is made to develop strong and achievable policies for disaster preparedness which can be quickly executed. Such plans should seek to include improved coordination between regional governments, both CSO's and NGO's, and the international community with a clear statement of the respective roles and responsibilities. A clear monitoring strategy of initiatives undertaken and their effects on the affected population also need to be regularly administered which seeks regular feedback directly from the intended beneficiaries.

While the majority of the displaced population lived in camps throughout the region, it is estimated that hundreds of thousands also fled to towns and cities which were perceived to offer greater protection. While the conditions they experienced were arguably better than those in the camps, those who fled to urban settings were often subjected to the mercy of their family and the community to survive. Some found themselves taken advantage of and became victims of sexual abuse and exploitation in order to provide for themselves. According to research conducted by Refugee Law Project, the policies and frameworks developed to meet the needs of IDP's do not include those who live in urban areas.³ Such measures therefore discriminate and do not provide for the needs of those outside of the camps. It is therefore imperative that policies take into consideration all victims of the conflict in order to ensure that the needs of the all displaced persons are met indiscriminately.

Resettlement Process:

Today northern Uganda is experiencing relative calm as a direct result of the Juba Peace Talks in 2006. Such conditions have allowed those once confined to the camps to begin resettling in either smaller, less congested satellite camps or to their original homesteads.

While certainly no one expected the population to be subjected to camp life for such an extended period of time, it is clear that the ramifications of such were not thought of nor adequately planned for before the decision was made to enforce the movement to camps in northern Uganda.

This has been evident through the rise in land conflicts in the region. Compensation to owners for land used to host the camps has often failed to materialize leading to instances where owners have forcefully evicted some residents or impose rent from those already struggling to provide for their families.

In addition, as people attempt to resettle in and cultivate their ancestral lands, many have become embroiled in violent land conflicts which further threaten to destabilize the region. While the GoU has mandated various structures to deal with conflicts over land, many of these institutions work independently and often provide contradictory and confusing messages to the community. This combined with the ignorance of the community regarding land rights and the processes developed to handle such conflicts has been disastrous. Therefore it is vital that potential conflicts are considered prior to carrying out initiatives so that strategies can be carefully designed to mitigate their potential negative affects.

Despite the development of Camp phase out guidelines by the GoU, incidences of forced evictions of the camps have been reported, putting extremely vulnerable individuals at even greater risk.⁴ The August 6th, 2009 demolition of 258 huts in Pabbo camp during the

³ Refugee Law Project. What About Us? The Exclusion of Urban IDP's from Uganda's IDP Related Policies and Interventions. Refugee Law Project Briefing Paper. December, 2007.

⁴ Section 5.0 seeks to ensure people are not evicted from camps and calls for special support to EVI's.

rehabilitation of a local health facility despite the residents being given inadequate notice is just one such incident.⁵ Not only is such an act illegal by both national and international standards⁶, it fully undermines the credibility of institutions and organisations who are mandated to serve conflict affected communities. While the rehabilitation of such services are not only welcome but needed, we urge all stakeholders to abide by the rule of law and to adequately deliberate over and plan such interventions to ensure that such efforts do not further exacerbate the plight of the people.

Recently a United Nations report stated that despite all efforts, “over 40% of families who return home from displacement camps are leaving children behind in the camps because of better access to education and health care there, while less than 30% of families who return home have access to clean drinking water.”⁷ While much emphasis has been put on the process of resettlement, these statistics highlight the significantly inadequate provision of basic services causing further undue harm to the people. While the Peace Recovery and Development Plan developed by the GoU has put forth a framework for addressing these needs, once again the implementation has been slow and ineffectual, exasperated by the GoU failure to contribute 30% of the budget as per their commitment. Once again, this highlights the failure of well intentioned policies to realize successful implementation.

Conclusion:

While once again the people of Uganda will rise up and demonstrate their resiliency despite the challenge of resettlement, we call upon all stakeholders to prioritize the plight of these victims and to work to in a coordinated way to overcome the devastation felt by those who have experienced the traumatic affects of war. All efforts must be designed through considerable consultation with the affected communities and take special consideration for the plight of the vulnerable such as women, child headed households, and the disabled/disfigured. Measures must also be developed to monitor and evaluate the initiatives taken in order to better bridge the gap between policy and implementation.

We applaud the African Union’s initiative to dialogue and seek concrete solutions to the plight of the many who have found themselves displaced throughout Africa. In Acholi we say, ‘*Kacel pi kuc,*’ meaning ‘*together for peace.*’ May all our efforts be united so that together the continent of Africa may be lifted up and the needs of her children met.

⁵ Adong Lilly. Forced Eviction in Pabbo Report. Amuru District Coordination Office. August, 2009.

⁶ UNOCHA (1998): Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, Guiding Principle 28.1 and The National Policy for Internally Displaced Persons (2004), Article 3.4: which commits the government to foster conditions, “which allow internally displaced persons to return voluntarily in safety and with dignity to their homes or places of habitual residence or to settle voluntarily in another part of the country.”