

Pursuing Peaceful Means to End the LRA Conflict: **Recommendations by ARLPI**

By Wade Snowdon, ARLPI Information Research and Documentation Officer

APRIL 2010



THE ACHOLI RELIGIOUS LEADERS PEACE INITIATIVE [ARLPI]

Plot 16 Olya Road
P.O. Box 104, Gulu, Uganda
Tel: 256-471-432484
Email: arlpinterfaith@gmail.com

Executive Summary:

Since 1997, the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI) has been urging the conflicting parties to engage in dialogue in order to resolve the conflict between the Government of Uganda (GoU) and the Lords Resistance Army (LRA) that has grossly affected the civilian population of Uganda and it's neighbors. Such efforts helped to establish the 2006 Juba Peace Talks where numerous agenda items were agreed upon and signed by both parties. Sadly in 2008, after two years of dialogue the GoU became impatient after the LRA rebel leader, Joseph Kony refused to sign the final agreement until he received clarification about components of '*Agenda Item #3: Accountability and Reconciliation.*'

As a result, a regional military offensive known as, '*Operation Lightning Thunder*' was launched in December of 2008 with claims from the GoU that the LRA would be fully wiped out within weeks. Similarly to previous offensives, this military initiative failed to meet this core objective and instead caused the LRA to flee to other regions where to this day, attacks against the civilian population continue unabated.

The challenges that remain as a result of military action failing to meet it's objectives continues to greatly affect the civilian population. The financial burden, failure to meet humanitarian needs, the spread of violence, failure to protect civilians, failure to address other negative forces who threaten regional security, the failure to cut off support and to name spoilers to the peace process, not considering the fate of the abducted, and the lack of patience in peaceful processes have all contributed to the continued suffering of the people. In light of these challenges, ARLPI continues to advocate for the end of military action and for communication and dialogue to resume between the conflicting parties, more specifically between the LRA, the GoU and the other affected areas such as South Sudan, DRC and CAR.

As the Juba peace talks brought the possibility of a lasting solution between the conflicting parties closer than ever, the failure of the regional governments to exhibit patience was a devastating blow to all who had been laboring to ensure the successful completion of the talks. The failure to fully exhaust all avenues to achieve a peaceful solution to the conflict and the faith many are putting in military action despite the consequences it is having on civilians is troubling.

In response, ARLPI is calling on all stakeholders to re-commit themselves to the non-violent pursuit of sustainable peace. To do so, we propose the following recommendations:

The Lords Resistance Army

- Immediately desist from all forms of violence against the civilian population.
- Release those abducted so they may return home to their families.
- Allow uninhibited access to individuals in need so that humanitarian aid can be provided to them.
- Show a commitment to peace by renewing communication with the GoU and/or other stakeholders.
- Honor commitments made during the Juba Peace Talks.

The Government of Uganda

- To develop a withdrawal plan for Ugandan troops in coordination with the regional governments and the United Nations to ensure civilian protection and containment of the conflict.
- Honor the commitments made to the Juba Peace Talks and seek ways for the hurried implementation of the agenda items.
- Fulfill the commitment to the Peace Recovery and Development Plan (PRDP) both financially and practically to ensure effective performance.
- Prioritize reconciliation and forge ways to foster harmonious coexistence.

The Regional Governments of LRA Affected Areas (Uganda, DRC, South Sudan, & CAR)

- Pursue dialogue with the LRA as a means of ending the conflict.
- Continue to engage in robust diplomacy with regional stakeholders to meet the needs of the affected people.
- Develop and support a joint containment strategy to ensure the violence does not continue to spread.
- Make it a commitment to meeting the humanitarian needs of the LRA affected communities in a time sensitive manner.
- Develop a plan to foster the return and rehabilitation of individuals who have been abducted by the LRA in their respective countries.
- Engage in trust and confidence building approaches with the LRA.
- Foster the return and rehabilitation of those who defect from the LRA.

International Community

- Continue to aid in the provision of resources and services to affected individuals/communities.
- Help to ensure the protection of civilians through non-violent means.
- Help to facilitate the return of LRA combatants.
- Increase support for the implementation of the items agreed upon in the Juba peace talks, especially transitional justice mechanisms which foster community reconciliation in accordance to what was agreed under Agenda Item #3 on Accountability & Reconciliation.
- Advocate for the reinstatement of the UN Special Envoy for LRA Affected Areas.
- Investigate, expose and hold accountable those who work to 'spoil' peace talks both locally and internationally.
- Investigate allegations, expose, and hold accountable those who provide assistance to the LRA.
- Renew their commitment, advocate for, and provide assistance to explore and utilize non-violent methods to resolve the conflict.
- Engage with stakeholders at the grassroot level of all LRA affected areas in the region in order to determine a consensus on how to move forward.

Introduction:

Since 1997, the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI) has been working tirelessly to find a peaceful resolution to the conflict between the Lords Resistance Army (LRA) and the government of Uganda (GoU). Having witnessed firsthand the suffering of millions of people as a result of the fighting, the religious leaders have unwaveringly advocated for dialogue to end the violence and have acted as bridge builders, messengers, mediators, advisors and observers in numerous attempts to broker peace between the conflicting parties.

While the Juba peace talks which started in 2006 can largely be attributed to the silence of the gun throughout northern Uganda, ARLPI recognizes that the conflict is far from over. After two years of negotiations which brought the prospect of peace in the region closer than ever before, patience wore out after the LRA commander, Joseph Kony refused to sign the final agreement saying he required clarification of the items under '*Agenda Item Three: Accountability and Reconciliation.*'

While stakeholders such as the religious leaders and cultural leaders continued to stay in contact with Kony urging him to sign the final agreement, in December of 2008, a regional military offensive dubbed, "*Operation Lightning Thunder*" was launched. Sadly, history repeated itself once again and the military operation failed to contain the violence and instead pushed the LRA from their base in Garamba into other regions once free of LRA attacks. While the Ugandan army known as the Uganda People's Defense Force (UPDF) claims that military action has weakened the LRA and reduced their troop size to around 250, attacks on civilians in Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Central African Republic (CAR) continue unabated.

The failure to obtain signatures on the final agreement in 2008 unfortunately resulted in the loss of support in pursuing a peaceful resolution to the conflict claiming that such a solution is not possible. Many question the sincerity of Kony and accuse him of using the peace talks to strengthen and re-arm his fighters. That being said, ARLPI argues that pursuing the LRA militarily has time and time again failed and instead results in the spread and increase in intensity of violence waged against innocent civilians.

With that in mind, this paper seeks to clarify ARLPI's position as to why all stakeholders including the GoU, the LRA, regional governments, and the international community should abandon military means to end the conflict and instead engage in peaceful means such as dialogue in order to provide a lasting solution to the conflict.

Challenges Resulting From Military Action:

While there have been numerous attempts to broker peace between the GoU and the LRA over the years, such attempts have always ended in the use of full scale military offenses, all which claimed to eliminate the LRA threat once and for all. Unfortunately, all such attempts failed to realize this lofty objective and instead dissolved all headway made during dialogue.

As the conflict has extended into its 23rd year, the region is facing the difficulty of dealing with the affects of the protracted violence. The challenges experienced by the failure of the military option to isolate the violence continues to prevent the region from realizing any significant achievements in the pursuit of sustainable peace. These challenges include:

Financial Burden of Military Action:

While the LRA has not been active in Uganda over the last few years, military spending remains a burden to Uganda as the UPDF continues to be involved in regional military activities against the LRA in neighboring countries. In July of 2009, the Ugandan army was allocated 433 billion UGX, however in February of 2010 a request was made for an additional Shs71.9 billion "*for continuing Operation Lightning Thunder and clearing unspecified domestic arrears.*"¹

It cannot be ignored that peace talks also require a significant amount of resources which requires assistance from the international community. In 2007, the projected cost of the Juba Peace talks was estimated to be 15.1 billion UGX with the GoU contributing 1.7 billion UGX of the budget.² However, such a figure clearly indicates the huge disparity in the financial burden of employing military offenses against the LRA as opposed to using peaceful means such as dialogue.

Humanitarian Needs of Northern Uganda:

The financial obligation which military options impose is especially troubling given the extensive needs which exist in northern Uganda as communities struggle to recover from the affects of decades of war.

The silence of the gun in the region which can be directly attributed to the Juba peace talks has afforded the majority of the almost 2 million people displaced throughout northern Uganda the opportunity to resettle back to their original homesteads. Such a process however has not been easy as such areas lack basic necessities and social services such as water, health care, and education.

Furthermore, as individuals are faced with reminders of the violence they have endured, there is a great need for trauma healing and reconciliation activities to help alleviate the negative consequences of such. Such needs were identified during the Juba Peace talks and were specifically catered for in '*Agenda Item 3: Accountability and Reconciliation.*' However, despite the agreement by both the LRA and the GoU, implementation has not taken place, albiet steps have been made to establish the Special High Court which will potentially try the individuals most responsible for the crimes committed during the conflict.

To help meet the needs of northern Uganda, in 2007 the GoU introduced the '*Peace, Reconciliation & Development Plan*' (PRDP) as a tool to help foster recovery and development throughout northern and north eastern Uganda. While the plan required the GoU to come up with 30% of the overall budget, it was a struggle to do so which caused a delay in it's implementation. As a result, many civil society organizations as well the beneficiaries are not convinced of the sincerity of the initiative and fear that corruption will prevent any impact from being felt where they are needed most.

While there is overlap with some of the priorities of the PRDP and the peace talks, this initiative should not be confused to be a tool used to implement the items agreed upon by both parties during the Juba peace talks. Furthermore, the mandate of PRDP extends beyond LRA affected areas in Uganda such as Karamoja and out of all of the plan objectives, allocates the least amount for peace and reconciliation activities.

1 Daily Monitor, February 15, 2010.

2 Govt-Kony Peace Talks Cost Shs5b, Pachodo.org: April 19, 2007 <http://www.pachodo.org/General-News/South-Sudan-News/govt-kony-juba-talks-cost-shs5b.html> accessed, March 5, 2010.

Lack of Patience in Peaceful Means:

Despite the significant disproportion of finances used during peace talks compared to employing military action, many stakeholders lack the patience required for a successful outcome to be realized. Given the complexity of the protracted conflict such initiatives require time to provide opportunities for in depth discussion, clarification, and community participation. This is especially so in cases such as the Juba peace talks where the actors at the negotiating table do not consist of members from the command structure as was the case with both the LRA and GoU delegation. The lack of patience which was displayed by many brings into question the commitment of stakeholders to finding a non-violent solution to the conflict and further destroys trust amongst the warring parties.

Particularly troublesome has been the patience that is often afforded to military operations by various stakeholders. For example, it was thought that “*Operation Iron Fist*” would be completed in a week with the effect of eliminating the LRA threat once and for all. Similarly, “*Operation Lightning Thunder*” extended it's original time frame and despite the withdrawal of some troops, UPDF forces remain conducting various military and intelligence activities in the region to this day. In fact, in the 23 years the conflict has waged on, less than 5 years in total have been allocated for an attempt at a peaceful resolution.³

Impact of Military Action on the Civilian Population:

Despite the agreed upon ceasefire between the GoU and the LRA, some attacks on the civilian population by the LRA continued to be reported during the various peace talks. However, abandoning the talks and engaging in renewed military action has always resulted in an increase in civilian casualties.

During the U.S. supported military campaign against the LRA dubbed, '*Operation Iron Fist*', the internally displaced in Uganda increased from 400,000 to over 1.5 million in the Acholi, Lango and Teso sub-regions of Uganda. Thousands more were displaced as the LRA moved further into Southern Sudan and DRC.

Similarly, following the 2008 U.S. supported regional offensive known as '*Operation Lightning Thunder*', the spread of LRA attacks resulted in a significant increase in displacement with almost 300,000 civilians left homeless in Province Orientale, DRC.⁴

Furthermore, such offenses have time and again resulted in the '*splintering*' of LRA fighters who then increase the level and intensity of looting and ambushing the civilian population in order to recoup their losses. After '*Operation Iron Fist*', the LRA extended into parts of Southern Sudan and Garamba in the DRC while '*Operation Lightning Thunder*' resulted in the movement of the LRA to places such as Dungu in the DRC, Yambio and Ezo in Southern Sudan, as well as Obo in Central African Republic (CAR).

According to UNOCHA, since the military offensive was launched in 2008, the LRA have killed over 1000 civilians and abducted many more in Sudan, the DRC, and CAR. Civilian displacement is even more extreme as 80,000 in Sudan, 540,000 in DRC, and an estimated 30,000 in Central African

3 1993-1994, March 2003, December 2004, 2005-2008.

4 UNOCHA. Population Movements in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, October, 2009

[http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/fullMaps_Af.nsf/luFullMap/1DFAC9170540B756852576770065DCF6/\\$File/map.pdf?OpenElement](http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/fullMaps_Af.nsf/luFullMap/1DFAC9170540B756852576770065DCF6/$File/map.pdf?OpenElement)

Republic (CAR) remain homeless due to insecurity resulting from LRA activity with an additional 10,500 refugees in Southern Sudan from CAR & DRC.

Some who support the use of a military option to resolve the conflict have stated that countries such as the United States who support the Ugandan army are committed to ensuring civilian protection. While this has not been demonstrated in the past during offenses such as '*Operation Lightning Thunder*' which received intelligence and logistical support from the Bush administration, some feel as though the Obama administration will be more cautious to provide assistance to any offensive that does not adequately plan for such.

Regardless of the the amount of planning, civilian casualties during military offenses continue to be a reality as seen in the recent coalition forces offensive called '*Operation Moshtarak*' against the Taliban in Afghanistan where civilians have been injured or killed and over 1000 families displaced by the fighting.⁵ If such casualties are reported during an operation with 15,000 coalition forces from the United States, Britain, Canada, Denmark, Estonia, and Afghan forces who have had much more training and possess advanced weaponry, little confidence can be placed in an operation consisting of less equipped regional security forces to ensure protection is afforded to civilians.

Failure of Security Forces in the Region:

Despite the presence of numerous security forces operating throughout the LRA affected region, attacks have continued unabated. In areas such as Western Equatoria, community members have complained that the SPLA has been unwilling to protect civilians due to tribal difference between the Zande and Dinka. Congolese forces have also been reported as being indisciplined and have been accused of raping, killing, and looting the civilians they are mandated to protect.

The presence of a mere 1200 troops from both the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMIS) and UN Mission in DRC (MONUC) has also failed to provide any significant protection. MONUC forces have also been unable to provide a sense of security as some of the forces have been accused of participating in activities such as rape and the looting of gold as well as fleeing when the rebels approach.

As a result, local militias who wield locally made weapons such as bows and arrows have been formed by grassroot communities as a way to protect themselves from further violence. Some have suggested equipping such groups with small arms so that they may more effectively ward off attacks. However some former LRA have warned against such as ambushes conducted by the LRA are often for the purpose of gaining supplies therefore having the potential of increasing the firepower of the rebel group.⁶

Additionally, providing weapons to the civilian population for self protection has had negative consequences as seen in Southern Sudan. From experience, many civilians are not confident that peace is sustainable. This sense of constant insecurity has resulted in the hiding of weapons despite disarmament operations in the country. These weapons have caused further insecurity as tribal differences flare up and have a potential of wreaking further havoc during and after the elections scheduled for 2010 as well as the referendum scheduled for 2011.

5 Operation Moshtarak Day By Day. BBC News: February 19th, 2010. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8516800.stm>

6 Conciliation Resources Conference on LRA Affected Areas: St. Monica's Tailoring School, 2009.

Existence of Other Negative Forces:

As the area in which the LRA operates is wracked with conflict and is home to many destabilizing rebel groups, at times there has been confusion as to who is responsible for specific atrocities throughout the region.

Allegations have been made that rebel groups and security forces have adopted '*LRA tactics*' in order to disguise their actions while engaging in activities such as rape and looting. Such tactics make it extremely difficult to gain reliable information as to who is responsible for such acts of violence.

For example in 2008, an attack on civilians in Southern Sudan became controversial as reports from the area suggested confusion as to whether the attack was conducted by the LRA or by the UPDF. To this day, many in northern Uganda also question as to whether the UPDF disguised themselves as rebels and conducted atrocities against the civilian population. This however is nothing new as suspicion surfaced after the 1995 Atiak massacre when the victims bodies were buried by the government soldiers before investigations could be conducted. To this day, some community members wonder if such actions were done to cover up actions conducted by the UPDF.

It also appears to be a tactic by the LRA to move to '*lawless*' areas when they are militarily pursued where they can either receive support or are able to operate with less interference. This has been seen most recently after '*Operation Lightning Thunder*' after the offensive failed to cut off the movement of the LRA who then fled towards the Darfur region of Sudan and the Central African Republic.

Supporters and Spoilers:

Throughout the conflict, the LRA has received support from various different stakeholders, most notably, the government of Kartoum. As Sudan endured through the north-south conflict, the GoU supported the SPLA to fight against the Kartoum government while in turn the Bashir supplied arms and other resources to the LRA.

While diplomatic relations between the Sudan and the GoU have improved, some in South Sudan claim the the LRA is still being used as a proxy force to destabilize the south in order to frustrate the elections of 2010 and the referendum that will determine the their independence in 2011. Such claims however have been vehemently denied by the Kartoum government.

Another destabilizing force that has allegedly been supporting the LRA is the '*Ambororo*' who are known throughout the region for violently raiding villages in Western Equatoria, South Sudan. The Western Equatoria State Governor, H.E. Jemma Kumba has expressed serious concerns about an alleged strong alliance between the Amboroos and the LRA stating that, "*there is evidence that the Ambororos are feeding and arming the LRA, who in turn do not abduct their children or loot their properties.*"⁷

Select members in the Ugandan diaspora have also reportedly provided moral, social, and political support to the rebels. Individuals from places such as the UK, the U.S., Canada and other African countries who fled Uganda before the war are thought to have contact with LRA leadership. In fact, it is reported that numerous text messages are partly responsible for the reluctance of Kony to sign the final peace agreement after he received threatening messages sent from members of the Ugandan diaspora, a UPDF official, and a civil society organization.

7 UNOCHA Sudan Security Briefing, November 2009.

Despite being on the U.S. list of terrorist organizations, it appears as though little to no effort has been made to name and isolate individuals and countries who continue to support the rebel group and/or interfere with the peace negotiations. While such has been done to those who support groups such as Al Qaeda and the Taliban who directly pose a threat to American security, the question remains as to why such tactics have not been applied to that of the LRA.

Hindrance to Reconciliation:

While military action may have the potential to neutralize or even eliminate the LRA, such a process will likely result in '*victors justice*' and fail to address the long standing grievances which exist in many communities throughout Uganda. For sustainable peace to be realized, the implementation of the agreed upon Juba peace talks Agenda Items needs to be fast tracked. However, for this to happen all stakeholders must participate fully in any transitional justice process which will not be possible if military action continues.

Furthermore, while the agreed upon *Agenda Item #3: Accountability & Reconciliation* does not call for the UPDF to take part in transitional justice mechanisms, the voluntary participation of all actors including the military would go a long way to foster an atmosphere of truth and reconciliation therefore having a significant impact on national healing.

Failure to Consider the Abducted:

During military action, members of the LRA who are killed are reported as being '*rebels*' while those who are captured or escape are often called '*rescued abductees*'. The majority of those who make up the LRA are individuals who at one time were abducted from their communities. The fact of the matter is that very few of the LRA fight voluntarily and do so out of fear or after years of brainwashing. Therefore the loss of any life whether it be a LRA soldier or a civilian is worthy to be mourned as the complexity of this conflict has made victims of us all.

While in war it is a common practice to de-humanize opponents regardless of the circumstances, ARLPI considers all people sons and daughters of God and prays for the safe return of all so that families tears may be turned to joy. Therefore it is integral that dialogue continue between the conflicting parties so that negotiation and mediation may occur in order to realize the release of these individuals.

Recommendations:

The challenges which exist despite and even because of the employment of military action, continue to greatly affect the lives of those those affected by the conflict. With the goal of fostering reconciliation and harmonious coexistence and out of a desire for sustainable peace and security for all people, ARLPI puts forth the following recommendations to the stakeholders listed below:

The Lords Resistance Army

- Immediately desist from all forms of violence against the civilian population.
- Release those abducted so they may return home to their families.
- Allow uninhibited access to individuals in need so that humanitarian aid can be provided to

them.

- Show a commitment to peace by renewing communication with the GoU and/or other stakeholders.
- Honor commitments made during the Juba Peace Talks.

The Government of Uganda

- To develop a withdrawal plan for Ugandan troops in coordination with the regional governments and the United Nations to ensure civilian protection and containment of the conflict.
- Honor the commitments made to the Juba Peace Talks and seek ways for the hurried implementation of the agenda items.
- Fulfill the commitment to the Peace Recovery and Development Plan (PRDP) both financially and practically to ensure effective performance.
- Prioritize reconciliation and forge ways to foster harmonious coexistence.

The Regional Governments of LRA Affected Areas (Uganda, DRC, South Sudan, & CAR)

- Pursue dialogue with the LRA as a means of ending the conflict.
- Continue to engage in robust diplomacy with regional stakeholders to meet the needs of the affected people.
- Develop and support a joint containment strategy to ensure the violence does not continue to spread.
- Make it a commitment to meeting the humanitarian needs of the LRA affected communities in a time sensitive manner.
- Develop a plan to foster the return and rehabilitation of individuals who have been abducted by the LRA in their respective countries.
- Engage in trust and confidence building approaches with the LRA.
- Foster the return and rehabilitation of those who defect from the LRA.

International Community

- Continue to aid in the provision of resources and services to affected individuals/communities.
- Help to ensure the protection of civilians through non-violent means.
- Help to facilitate the return of LRA combatants.
- Increase support for the implementation of the items agreed upon in the Juba peace talks, especially transitional justice mechanisms which foster community reconciliation in accordance to what was agreed under Agenda Item #3 on Accountability & Reconciliation.
- Advocate for the reinstatement of the UN Special Envoy for LRA Affected Areas.
- Investigate, expose and hold accountable those who work to 'spoil' peace talks both locally and internationally.
- Investigate allegations, expose and hold accountable those who provide assistance to the LRA.
- Renew their commitment, advocate for, and provide assistance to explore and utilize non-violent methods to resolve the conflict.
- Engage with stakeholders at the grassroot level of all LRA affected areas in the region in order to determine a consensus on how to move forward.

Conclusion:

For over two decades, numerous attempts have been made to resolve the brutal conflict between the GoU and the LRA.

Bearing witness to the violence that has devastated the region for over 23 years, ARLPI continues to advocate unwaveringly for the use of dialogue and other non-violent approaches in order to achieve sustainable peace.

While this region has become known internationally for the brutal and horrific violence resulting from conflict, may God grant us the wisdom, patience and grace needed to change the situation so that one day, we are known for our commitment to peace.

About the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI):

The Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI) is an interfaith peace building and conflict transformation organisation formed in 1997 as a proactive response to the conflict in northern Uganda. Our mission is sustainable peace through dialogue and non-violent approaches to transform conflict.

ARLPI brings together the religious leaders from the four different religious denominations and their respective constituencies (Muslim, Catholic, Anglican, & Orthodox) to participate effectively in transforming the conflict.

ARLPI primarily operates in the Acholi region of Uganda (Amuru, Gulu, Kitgum, Lamwor, & Pader), but has been working throughout the region and abroad on various conflict issues.

ARLPI has been involved in numerous initiatives to end the LRA conflict including acting as bridge builders between the LRA and GoU as well as advisors and observers to the 2006 Juba peace talks.

For more information about ARLPI, feel free to contact us at:

ARLPI
Plot 16, Olya Road
P.O. Box 104
Gulu, Uganda

Office: +256 471432484
Email: arlpi.interfaith@gmail.com

Or check out our website at: www.arlpi.org