

Why the Acholi Religious Leaders' Peace Initiative Was Selected For the 21st Niwano Peace Prize

The Niwano Peace Foundation (Nichiko Niwano, President; Kinjiro Niwano, Chairman) has decided to award the 21st Niwano Peace Prize to the Acholi Religious Leaders' Peace Initiative (ARLPI), which works to promote an end to conflict, the defense of social justice and human rights, and the peaceful coexistence of different peoples in the East African country of Uganda. Having asked for recommendations from about 1,000 well-informed people in 125 countries around the world, the Niwano Peace Prize Committee conducted its deliberations in strict fairness before coming to their decision. The Niwano Peace Prize Committee was set up in May last year on the occasion of the 20th Anniversary of the Niwano Peace Prize, and consists of 10 religious leaders from around the world who are involved in movements for peace and interreligious cooperation. This is the Committee's first selection of an individual or organization for the Prize. The ARLPI is also the first organization from the African continent to receive the Prize.

The ARLPI is an organization in northern Uganda in which the members of different religions, including Islam and Christianity (Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican), work together. Since its establishment in 1998, it has acted non-violently to end armed conflict, to nurture human resources for the task of creating peace, and to provide assistance to war victims through the work of over 400 volunteers, including its core membership of religious leaders, as well as individual staff members, peace committees in various districts, and peace supporters.

The northerners of Uganda have dominated the country's military establishment from the time of British colonial occupation up until the rule of the most recent former government. The present government's military, however, is dominated by people belonging to tribes from the south. Guerilla war in northern Uganda has been intensifying, centering around the dissatisfied remnants of the former military elite. In particular, in the midst of civil war with government troops, an anti-

government group called the “Lord’s Resistance Army” (LRA) has repeatedly committed grave human-rights abuses against ordinary citizens. They have destroyed homes, schools, clinics, and other village infrastructure and have unceasingly committed acts of murder, violence, and plunder. Kidnapping of small children and young people by the group has become a daily menace; so far the number kidnapped is said to be as many as 20,000.

Fearing murder, pillage, and kidnapping, people have fled their homes to seek safe refuge elsewhere, many of whom have unavoidably ended up living in camps. Prolonged LRA attacks have resulted in an internal refugee population within Uganda of over 1 million, half of whom are children. The war intensified in June 2002, spreading the conflict from the districts of Gulu, Kitgum, and Pader in northern Uganda, where it was formerly confined, to other districts like Soroti, Katakwi, Kabermaido, and Apac in Eastern Uganda. Deteriorating security has undermined economic activity, prolonging a situation in which food can neither be grown nor purchased freely. Many of the refugees rightly fear attacks by the LRA should they return home, while at the same time they are considered “anti-government sympathizers” by government forces because they belong to the same tribe as the LRA, and so find themselves helplessly caught between the two.

In midst of this situation, this year’s prizewinner, the ARLPI, has been building up its campaign to promote dialogue between the Ugandan government and the LRA. As a result of a direct meeting with Uganda’s President, the ARLPI has been designated the official government representative for peace negotiations. The ARLPI was given a go-ahead to develop contacts with the LRA for possibility of peace negotiation. The ARLPI also received request from the LRA leadership that it serves as bridge between them and the government. Although contacts for negotiations are irregular, and there are a great many difficulties in carrying out talks in the area of conflict, a path to peace has been sufficiently cleared.

The ARLPI consistently relies on non-violence in its work toward a peaceful resolution to the conflict. It sponsors “prayer gatherings” and marches for peace, which attract a great many

ordinary citizens who have been harmed by the hostilities. Gatherings are held at sites where massacres have occurred, and participants express their clear intent to reject violence. A peace march is held in Gulu, Kitgum and Pader on December 31, every year, where a large number of people called for dialogue and an end to the war.

The ARLPI also sets up peace committees in areas that have suffered from the conflict, and nurtures those who can cooperate in the pursuit of peace. It carries out training programs for volunteers that teach them to deal with conflict (through negotiation, mediation, arbitration, and the peace process), heal trauma, and enhance their communication and leadership abilities. As a result, a body of people for peace is being created at a steady pace. In addition, the district peace committees send the ARLPI information that is invaluable in its tasks of publishing reports and press releases. The socio-economic situation in the southern part of Uganda around the capital city of Kampala is relatively good, so interest in the suffering of people in the north is low. As a way of breaking through this apathy toward the problems in the north, the high-credibility surveys and reports by the ARLPI play an important role in creating a trend in domestic and international public opinion in support of peace.

The ARLPI also places great importance on the education of small children and young people in the refugee camps. How the coming generation of young people is educated will determine the basic nature of the country in future. The ARLPI introduced an education program in 2001, and is serious in its pursuit of educating people to support peace. Outside of the refugee camps as well, there are growing numbers of children who cannot pay their school fees due to the disruption of the economy, and so they offer a school-fee support program. Another major problem is that when children who have been abducted return, there is often nobody in the village community to provide protection and support for their integration, so the ARLPI is working to provide protection and support for their integration in their community.

ARLPI's motto is "Together for Peace." It places its greatest priority on cooperation not

just within the tribe, but among all people, including regional leaders, members of elected assemblies, domestic and international NGOs, soldiers, farmers, etc. They have expressed their basic outlook as follows; “Peace is a long-term group effort that demands everybody's involvement.”

“We have a vision of our land where people will be able to travel without fear, children will go to school and not have to fight, women will go to till their fields without fear of being raped or abducted, people will sit by the fireplace in the evening and sleep quietly in their homes, former rebels will be forgiven, reconciled and reintegrated in their villages, displaced camps will be dismantled, and soldiers will be able to patrol without guns.” This vision of very ordinary life is a symbolic expression of the extreme conditions plaguing Uganda today.

Leading members of the ARLPI have said, “The ARLPI is not engaged in doing purely human work, but in cooperating with God.” Despite differences in their religions, all the districts’ religious leaders work together to raise their voices as one in calling for an end to violence—by doing so, they believe that they can clearly speak for the people and for God. As religious leaders, they made the decision to be the servants of their people and testify for their faith, and are even now risking their lives to carry on their work.

The Niwano Peace Foundation would like to express its deep respect for all the people who are expressing their religious faith through their involvement in the ARLPI. In commemoration of the ARLPI’s tremendous achievements to this day, and in the hope that numerous more like-minded people will follow in their footsteps, we are most honored to present the 21st Niwano Peace Prize to the Acholi Religious Leaders’ Peace Initiative.