

Forgotten crisis, irreversible damage



For the past seventeen years the north and east of the country have suffered an armed conflict that has been described by the UN Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs as “a forgotten crisis”. In the context of the war between government troops and the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) guerrillas the most brutal atrocities have been committed and the human rights of over two million people have been violated. The resolution of this conflict demands urgent international intervention.

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The impact of the conflict

For 17 years, the population in the north and east of Uganda has been caught in the middle of a devastating conflict.¹ The impact of the war includes the violation and denial of human rights to life, food, shelter, health, education, personal security, and access to public and international resources to two million people. Despair and insecurity plague the population. Children born or growing up in this environment have no future, in fact, they are hardly able to survive the present: since 1996 some 20,000 children have been abducted to serve in the guerrilla, and some two million have been displaced.²

Abduction, rape, murder

Abductees are tied together at the ankle, forced to carry heavy loads, and made to walk as long as eight hours a day without pause, until they reach Nichitu camp in Southern Sudan.³ As soon as they arrive,

they start receiving rudimentary military training. Any children who attempt to escape are killed or severely punished.⁴

Girls are raped by both LRA commanders and government soldiers. Other acts of aggression include the maiming of adults and children, ambushing of vehicles and destruction of homes, crops and infrastructure.

The conflict has seen some of the worst forms of merciless killings. It is estimated that over 23,520⁵ people have been killed while two million people have moved to the Internally Displaced People’s camps (IDP).⁶ In one camp alone, there are about 10,000 children.⁷

Education

In the IDP camps there are no schools. Even if the necessary educational infrastructure existed, there would be massive overcrowding and constant fear of LRA raids, generating an unpropitious environment for learning. There would also be problems with recruiting teachers and obtaining learning materials. The negative effect of the conflict on primary education also led to a drop in farm production. A study by Deininger and Okidi shows that there is a strong relationship between years of primary school education and the value of farm production (an increase of 5% for every year that the head of household has attended primary school).⁸ Years of primary education lost therefore imply a decrease in farm production.

Health

Malnutrition, malaria, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and psychological trauma are common. In the IDP camps, sanitation is poor,⁹ there are almost no medicines available, and people starve to death rather than risking venturing out of the camps to look for food. Water is a luxury: one borehole has to cover the needs of around 30,000 people.

The population cannot cultivate crop varieties that would contribute to food security and a balanced diet.¹⁰ They sleep without mosquito nets, so the multiplication of malarial parasites goes unchecked. Furthermore, drugs to treat malaria are in very short supply. The result of these poor health conditions is a high death rate: on average, 100 deaths a day from malaria, measles, diarrhoea and respiratory infections were recorded in 10 camps containing 220,000 people.

In addition to the high number of rape cases, a report by the Gulu Social and Counselling Organisation (GUSCO) revealed that after abducted girls had been rescued and medically examined, 85% were found to be infected with various sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Since there is a high correlation between STDs and HIV/AIDS, it is feared that most of the girls may be HIV positive.

Impact on the national economy

The coalition Civil Society Organisations for Peace in Northern Uganda (CSOPNU) estimates that the conflict has cost the country about 3% of its annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP), or around USD 1.33 billion for the past 17 years. The main costs derive from heavy military expenditure and loss of export earnings from primary goods such as cotton, tobacco, and *simsim* (sesame seeds) produced in the conflict region. Also lost are development opportunities, as in the case of international aid for four regional hospitals that had to be cancelled due to the lack of security.¹¹

1 Populations for districts directly affected by mass internal displacement are as follows: Northern Uganda - Apac (676,244), Gulu (468,407), Kitgum (286,122), Lira (757,763), Pader (293,679); Eastern Uganda - Kaberamaido (122,924), Katakwi (307,032), and Soroti (371,986); totalling 3,284,157, i.e. 13% of the total 24.7 million-strong population. Populations for districts affected due their proximity to the areas in which insurgents operate are: Northern Uganda - Adjumani (201,493), Arua (855,055), Kotido (596,130), Moroto (170,506), Moyo (199,912), Nakapiripirit (153,862), Nebbi (433,466), Yumbe (253,325) totalling 2,863,749, i.e. 12% of the population. Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2001.

2 *The Monitor*, 26 October 2003, p. 1.

3 “Andrew Akera, 13, was abducted in 2001. He recalls that, during abduction, the legs of abducted children were tied and the camp set ablaze. Each child carried about 40 kg of looted items, and walked for nearly eight hours. They stopped to cook for two hours. Abducted children ate greens, while the Rebel Commanders ate fish, meat and flour. They slept in the bush. For a month, abduction of children and looting continued, and thereafter children were all taken to Nichitu Camp in Southern Sudan.” *The Monitor*, 19 November 2003, p. 15.

4 “Orders were given that whoever tried to escape be killed. On one occasion [Andrew Akera] was whipped all over the body for attempting to escape and left for dead until the following day.” *The Monitor*, 19 November 2003, p. 15.

5 Dorsey, J and S Opeitum. *The Net Economic Cost of the Conflict in the Acholiland Sub-Region of Uganda*. Kampala: Civil Society Organisations for Peace in Northern Uganda (CSOPNU), 2002, p. 7.

6 *The Monitor*, 20 November 2003, p. 1.

7 Oloch, James. “16,000 IDPs at Bala Stock Farm lack medical services and 10,000 children were not attending school.” *The New Vision*, 10 November 2003.

8 Deininger, Klaus and John Okidi. “Rural Households, Incomes, Productivity and Non-Farm Enterprises” in: *Uganda’s Recovery: The Role of Farms, Firms and Government*. World Bank, Regional and Sectoral Studies, October 1991, pp. 123-174.

9 Gulu District officials report that 250 people share one pit latrine in the IDP camps. *The Monitor*, 1 November 2003, p. 4.

10 *The Sunday Monitor*, 16 November 2003, pp. 14-15.

11 The Japanese had to cancel hospital rehabilitation grants to the districts of Yumbe, Moyo and Adjumani due to insecurity.

The Government has injected resources in an attempt to organise the displaced population into IDP camps. The camps themselves have not been safe from attacks by the LRA. Over two million people live in IDP camps, and providing for their basic needs is an uphill struggle.

Conflict resolution efforts

In the early 1990s peace talks were initiated between the Government and the LRA. The then Minister of State in charge of the northern districts represented the Government and went as far as holding meetings with representatives of the LRA. However this initiative failed since the Government insisted that the rebels surrender their weapons within a given period. The LRA refused to meet this condition and resumed their insurgency activities, which continue to the present day. The Government subsequently attempted to defeat the LRA by signing a military agreement with the Sudanese Government (Operation Iron Fist) allowing the Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF) to follow LRA fighters into Sudanese territory to destroy their bases. Little has been achieved so far.

There have been other peace efforts. The 2000 Amnesty Act granted amnesty and resettlement to surrendering rebels. Out of an estimated 50,000 rebels, only 10,000 have so far taken advantage of the amnesty, according to the Amnesty Commission. The amnesty expired on 31 December 2003 and the mandate of the Amnesty Commission expired on 17 January 2004. The Presidential Peace Commission has unsuccessfully tried to meet representatives of the LRA.¹²

Civil society organisations and individuals have also tried to initiate peace talks. In 2001, a Local Peace Initiative led by Father Tarcisio and Chief "Rwot" Joseph Oywak tried to persuade the LRA to enter into negotiations. However in one incident the UPDF stormed the venue and the initiative was abandoned. The Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI) also managed to meet LRA representatives and the Justice and Peace Commission of the Gulu Archdiocese has been trying to negotiate. In all these attempts it is clear

what is lacking is a central peace co-ordinating mechanism.

At the national level 34 Members of Parliament from the northern region staged a walkout of Parliament in protest against the Government's inability to put an end to the suffering of the population.¹³ President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni granted the MPs an audience and currently various local militia groups are being trained to defend the population in different villages.

Human security demands the involvement of the international community. In a recent visit, the UN Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs acknowledged that this conflict was "a forgotten crisis". The Netherlands Minister for Development Cooperation also informed the President that the military option had failed to bring peace and that she intended to campaign in the European Union to get the warring parties to the negotiating table.¹⁴ Critical attention is also necessary in the Sudan. Although the Sudanese Government denies it,¹⁵ the LRA maintains bases and receives support from southern Sudan.

Conclusion

There is no effective co-ordination of conflict resolution mechanisms. This is not the time to apportion blame. It is worth considering other options:

- Involvement of the UN Security Council, which would address concerns related to the LRA having bases outside the borders of Uganda.
- Direct negotiations through a third party or a process supervised by the international community.
- Development by the Government of a policy for disaster management and peace building.
- Sensitisation by the Government, civil society, the media and opinion leaders to make people aware that this conflict is of national, regional and international concern.
- Extension of the amnesty that ended on 31 December 2003.

- Urgent humanitarian assistance.
- A comprehensive programme for rehabilitation and development.

Although the damage is irreversible, it is imperative to find a solution to this complex geo-political situation. A legal framework for conflict resolution, consistency and commitment are desperately needed. ■

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¹³ *The Monitor*, 20 November 2003, p. 1.

¹⁴ *The Monitor*, 15 October 2003, p. 4.

¹⁵ *The Monitor*, 25 October 2003, p. 1.

¹² *The New Vision*, 25 October 2003, p. 3.