

# **INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE**

*November 2, 2006*

## ***The Conflict in Northern Uganda:***

### ***Peace and Reconciliation can be achieved***



For the past 20 years, the people of Northern Uganda have endured a conflict involving the rebel Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Government of Uganda. Up to 2 million people – eighty percent of the Northern population – have been displaced and forced to live in neglected internally displaced persons camps; currently the number of displaced is estimated at 1.2 million persons.

The LRA has used horrific tactics that include forced abduction and conscription, mutilation, torture, rape and sexual assault. The ongoing conflict and displacement has caused a humanitarian crisis and exacerbated social, economic, and political divisions within Uganda. It has also caused instability throughout the region as the LRA expanded its area of operations deeper into southern Sudan and to the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Currently, the Government of South Sudan, led by President Salva Kiir and Vice President Riek Machar, is attempting to negotiate a final peace settlement between the Government of Uganda and the LRA in the town of Juba. On August 25, 2006, the LRA and the Government of Uganda signed a cessation of hostilities agreement. Most Ugandans believe that these peace talks offer a real chance to end the war. For the first time in the past 20 years, the LRA and the Government of Uganda may be genuine in their desire for peace.

#### **Effects of the Conflict**

**Death and Disease:** The primary victims of the conflict are civilians. Access to safe water and basic health services is limited due to the overcrowded camps and poor government services and infrastructure. Malaria, tuberculosis, HIV disease, as well as epidemic diseases are rampant. Over the past year there has been better access to and more services provided in the camps and in areas where displaced people have returned. However, living conditions remain below basic minimum standards and are not sufficient to prevent the spread of disease.

**Human Rights Abuses:** Confinement of displaced people to camps, abduction and forced conscription of children, and violence against women has been common occurrences in Northern Uganda in recent years. Violations of basic human rights have proliferated both inside and outside the camps.

A Torn social fabric: The social cohesion and traditional coping mechanisms of the Acholi people have been severely damaged by this prolonged stay in overcrowded, insecure and under-served camps. Communities have lost their traditional agricultural livelihoods and social and family unity.

### **Is this the End of the War?**

Populations are returning: The people of Northern Uganda are beginning to go home. In Lira district, more than 70% of the population has already returned and is beginning to slowly rebuild homes and communities. Many of the people from the districts of Kitgum, Gulu and Pader are gaining access to their farmlands and may want to move home permanently, should the security situation remain calm. Return is more than mere movement: it is a long term process to help re-establish livelihoods while providing basic social services.

An Opportunity for a Peaceful settlement: Negotiations currently held in Juba, Sudan provide the best opportunity to secure and consolidate a peaceful settlement. This would bring an end to decades of hostility and violence and improve security throughout the region. The recent agreement between the Government of Uganda and the LRA to cease hostilities is an encouraging first step. Talks must continue to address the root causes of the conflict – the antagonism between the peoples of Northern and Southern Uganda and recurrent cycles of political violence. Otherwise, the LRA may reincarnate itself in the coming years.

The International Criminal Courts (ICC) indictments against five LRA leaders are intended to bring to justice those who have perpetrated human rights abuses and war crimes. At the same time, peace negotiations in Juba could end a war that has denied basic human rights and security to millions. Peace comes first, then justice. The peace talks must lead to a cessation of hostilities and focus on reconciliation, reintegration, and reconstruction in Northern Uganda.

Once hostilities have truly ended, and reintegration is underway, appropriate judicial measures and mechanisms can be considered for those who have committed crimes against humanity. The ICC has partly succeeded in Uganda: without the arrest warrants, many believe the LRA would not have come to the negotiating table. However, the ICC indictments may need to be altered at some point if northern Uganda is to achieve lasting peace.

Or Else: The current situation is extremely precarious and hostile rhetoric from either side is unhelpful. The stakes are high: if this opportunity for a peaceful settlement of the conflict is not seized, the conflict may reignite and escalate.

The LRA, Government of Uganda, and the international community must take action, invest in the current peace process, and follow with reconstruction and reconciliation.

**Recommendations:** The International Rescue Committee urges:

The Lord's Resistance Army to:

- Adhere to the cessation of hostilities agreement and end all attacks on and abductions of civilians
- Allow LRA combatants to freely enter cease fire zones without suffering retribution
- Free women and children and allow them to be reunited with their families and communities

The Government of Uganda to:

- Adhere to the cessation of hostilities agreement
- Remain committed to the Juba Peace talks despite potential setbacks
- Recognize the humanitarian crisis and allocate funding for the North: the government must fulfill its financial, legal and moral obligations to provide basic services and protect all of its citizens
- Integrate the north politically, socially and economically into the rest of Uganda

The UN and humanitarian agencies to:

- Appoint a Humanitarian Coordinator for Northern Uganda
- Take actions to protect civilians and insist that the Ugandan government protect its own citizens
- Provide services in accord with the Humanitarian Minimum Standards (known as the Sphere Standards) and use a human rights-based approach to reach the millions of displaced living in horrendous conditions

The Donor Community to:

- Support the peace process in Juba
- Allocate the funds needed for reconstruction, reconciliation and reintegration for Northern Uganda
- Focus emergency relief toward reducing the causes of high mortality in the camps and return areas
- Pressure the government to protect and provide for its citizens
- Pressure the Government to adhere to the cessation of hostilities and other agreements in Juba