

## SITUATION REPORT

# NORTHERN UGANDA

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The report is based on findings during October 2003. For enquiries or comments, contact: Shameza Abdulla, [sabdulla@fewerafrica.org](mailto:sabdulla@fewerafrica.org).

## INTRODUCTION

The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebels have been waging a seventeen-year war that has led to gross violations of human rights against civilians living in the northern areas of Gulu, Kitgum, Pader, Arua (Acholiland) and Soroti. The issue of child abductions has persisted ever since the beginning of the LRA insurgency 17 years ago. It is reported that the rebel group has abducted at least 5,000 children since the beginning of 2003, in addition to an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 since the creation of the group.

Despite condemnation of human rights abuses voiced by NGOs, religious institutions and the international community, the atrocities in the north continue unabated. Beyond the provision of basic humanitarian assistance, no significant action by the international community or regional institutions (e.g. African Union) has been taken to address the conflict in northern Uganda. The national government's military response has met with little success in dealing with the rebels as more civilians have been killed and displaced and child abductions have multiplied since the beginning of *Operation Iron Fist* in March 2002.<sup>1</sup>

In what many have been seen as an attempt to garner international support for the war in Iraq, the United States government labelled the LRA a terrorist organisation, and increased military aid to the government of Uganda in exchange for the use of Ugandan military bases. This action has served to minimise the window of opportunity for dialogue between the government and the rebels since the beginning of June 2002, as the government of Uganda does not want to be seen to 'negotiate with terrorists'. Despite increased military actions against the LRA, it is apparent that a military solution is not the answer to resolving this conflict. It fails to address not only the root causes of the conflict but also contributing factors that allow it to persist, such as the Ugandan government arming other rebels against the LRA.

A military solution to eliminate the LRA has thus far principally hurt the population in northern Uganda. The continuation of *Operation Iron Fist* has failed to defeat the LRA, while the Ugandan People's Defence Forces (UPDF) have been accused of committing gross human rights violations against civilians. In addition, the UPDF has begun supporting other militias such as the Teso Arrow Group and the Karamajong warriors to fight against the LRA. These activities have increased the levels of insecurity in northern Uganda. All efforts at the national and regional level to bring the

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<sup>1</sup> As of September 2003, there are approximately 1.2 million IDPs in Northern Uganda; specifically Acholiland. Gen. Salim Saleh's scheme to institutionalise the IDPs is a fear among humanitarian agencies. In Awere, 1800km from Gulu, families are given 1 hectare of land to work on; they work the land in exchange for food and protection. Coincidentally, the land belongs to a member of Museveni's cabinet. Saleh is "fundraising" to have more of these types of IDP camps. From interviews with, James Otto, Director, Human Rights Focus (HURIFO). Interviewed Oct 9, 2003, Speke Hotel, Kampala, Uganda.

Eliane Duthoit, Head of Office, UN OCHA. Interviewed Oct 10, 2003 Ruth Towers, Kampala, Uganda.

government of Uganda and the LRA to broker a peace agreement have seemingly failed.

Yet, research into the conflict-stricken area has also revealed an array of local level peace-building activities supporting a national level peace process. These initiatives are seeking partners to aid them in fundraising, awareness raising, and increasing the level of international advocacy to apply pressure on both the Ugandan government and the LRA to broker a national peace agreement. In addition, countries in Europe and Canada have expressed interest in funding local level peace initiatives that are undertaken in collaboration with northern NGOs.

## **LORD'S RESISTANCE ARMY (LRA)**

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Though this group has been in existence for over seventeen years, very little is known about their operations, command structures and political agenda. At first, it was thought that the LRA were fighting for the Acholi people, who are considered marginalised by the "Southerners" (southern Ugandans). However, the majority of their attacks have been against the Acholi population in the north.

The LRA received an invitation from the government of Sudan in 1994 to set up bases on Sudanese territory in order to aid the government's military response to the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). To replenish their supply of recruits and food, the LRA would mount massive raids into Acholiland. Prior to June 2002, there was hope for peace as the Acholi Leaders Peace Initiative began engaging in local dialogue with LRA combatants. However, the government then launched *Operation Iron Fist*, which disrupted this initiative irrevocably. The military destroyed most LRA bases in South Sudan, driving them into Acholiland where they have been carrying out a reign of terror on the civilian population ever since.

There has never been a formal cease-fire between government forces (the UPDF) and the LRA. LRA spokesman Sam Kilo declared a cease-fire in August 2003 but the government refused to acknowledge it. There was a limited cease-fire (6 March 2003) in the small town of Pajule in Pader district, where religious leaders were sent to the bush to meet with the 'chief of staff' of the LRA, Tallbert Yadin.<sup>2</sup> This was the last time any dialogue with the LRA has taken place.

Based on responses in interviews, there is debate about whether the LRA is well organised. It has an amorphous structure and composition, whilst being able to efficiently co-ordinate small attacks. As one interviewee put it, "in a classical sense they are an effective guerrilla army."

The LRA do not have a political wing and little is known about Joseph Kony, the leader. This might be a case where the myth of the man may be more than the man himself. Some of the Acholi believe that he has supernatural powers, which they use to explain why the government has been unable to destroy him and his intelligence network.<sup>3</sup>

Since March 2003, LRA forces have been moving steadily southwards and eastwards, toward Kampala. Although this would apparently suggest a growth in strength, it may rather be indicative of a more strategic approach in assaults. The northern Acholi populations have increasingly moved into IDP camps or towns from small rural villages. Farms have been abandoned and arable land is left untended, leaving nothing for LRA forces to loot for supplies. Also, the displaced populations are in high concentrations in towns and IDP camps, where they are protected by the UPDF,

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<sup>2</sup>Hon. Reagan Ronald Okumu, Member of Presidential Peace Team, Interviewed Oct 8, 2003. Speke Hotel, Kampala, Uganda.

<sup>3</sup> Hon. Reagan Ronald Okumu, Member of Presidential Peace Team, Interviewed Oct 8, 2003. Speke Hotel, Kampala, Uganda. Rose Otieno & Stella Sabiiti, Centre for Conflict Resolution, Oct 8-10, 2003, Kampala, Uganda.

therefore making it harder for the LRA to conduct abductions. The movement southwards and eastwards is, if anything, a change in survival tactics to move to areas where people are still growing food and where there are villages that are unprotected by the UPDF.<sup>4</sup>

On October 9, 2003 on Uganda's Independence Day, the LRA attacked a military unit 18 km north of Soroti. They raided the base, looted all the supplies and escaped back into the bush. This was a particularly significant event, as it was the first time that the LRA had deliberately attacked a military unit as far south as Soroti, located only a few hours from Kampala by road.

## **THE ARMY AND THE GOVERNMENT**

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The government remains without a strategy for political dialogue and the strategy for the army is also unclear. Yoweri Museveni's government has spent USD 100 million on defence since the beginning of the war. However, the language used by the government makes it apparent that the seriousness of the conflict is downplayed.

The government's strategy has been two-pronged. It has both increased military spending by making more funds available for counter insurgency training, and embarked on a campaign to improve the government's image in Acholiland by granting an amnesty package to rebels when they surrender. The government has also proceeded to arm various ethnic groups and factions against the LRA, most notably the Arrow Group in Teso and the Karamojong warriors in Karamoja. The support offered to these groups contradicts the government's earlier assertion that the UPDF lacks capacity in terms of arms and finances to fight the LRA. It should also be noted that the government was able to provide 'home guards' for Acholiland; 18,000 of them were in place to fight the LRA where they would earn USD \$20 a month. However, the government subsequently sent them to fight in the DRC where, as Ugandan foot soldiers, they received \$80 a month.<sup>5</sup>

There are a number of reasons that the government of Uganda has offered to explain the lack of success of the UPDF:

- ❑ The Acholi people support the rebels and subsequently, the leaders of the Acholi support the rebellion;<sup>6</sup>
- ❑ Political 'parties' in Uganda sympathise with the rebellion and provide support for them;
- ❑ Newspapers and other media support the rebels; coverage of attacks boost the morale of the rebels;
- ❑ The diplomatic community prefers the government to talk, thus inhibiting effective military actions to 'wipe out' the rebels or buy good weapons;
- ❑ The Parliament does not give enough money for the military;
- ❑ Laxity in the army, inexperienced soldiers

The Government of Uganda suspects Rwanda of providing support to the LRA but no evidence has emerged to prove this. Moreover, a new rebel group in the western part of country has entered the Ugandan scene. According to some commentators it is a resurgence of the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), others say it is not ADF but labelled as such. Recently, 3000 UPDF were posted in

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<sup>4</sup> From interviews with, Eliane Duthoit, Head of Office, UN OCHA. Interviewed Oct 10, 2003 Ruth Towers, Kampala, Uganda; and Grace R. Onyango, World Vision, Uganda, Oct 8, 2003, Kampala, Uganda

<sup>5</sup> In the present home guards, 60% of fighters are Acholi, whereas in 1996 they only accounted for 4% of the army. Interview with Hon. Reagan Ronald Okumu, Member of Presidential Peace Team, Interviewed Oct 8, 2003. Speke Hotel, Kampala, Uganda.

Rose Otieno & Stella Sabiti, Centre for Conflict Resolution, Oct 8-10, 2003, Kampala, Uganda

Grace R. Onyango, World Vision, Uganda, Oct 8, 2003, Kampala, Uganda.

<sup>6</sup> At the beginning of the conflict, the government told the Ugandan people it was the Acholi people who supported the rebels. In latter years, because the government no longer wants to be seen as 'hostile' to the Acholi people, they laid the accusations on the leaders of the Acholi people.

Bundibugyo (south of Lake Albert, bordering North Kivu and Ituri, DRC) to deal with this group.<sup>7</sup>

## PEACE ACTORS AND ACTIONS

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When the UPDF stepped up their attacks on the LRA and their bases in South Sudan after March last year, the LRA contacted the government and as a result the government was under public pressure to negotiate with the rebels who apparently wanted to engage in dialogue. It is from that public pressure that President Museveni created the Presidential Peace Team (PPT). The PPT is a group of MPs chosen by the president, to act as peace envoys between the government and the rebels. Yet, the relationship between the PPT, the President and the army is not clearly defined. The PPT is not facilitated by the government in terms of administrative support and has an unclear ToR which has served to limit their ability to carry out certain activities. Despite some accusations that members of the PPT only want to improve their prestige, the presidential peace team has been the only part of the Uganda government that has actively worked with civil society organisations, such as the Acholi Religious Leaders' Peace Initiative, to engage in dialogue with the LRA.

Moreover, a group of parliamentarians interested in peace-building has established the *Amani Forum*. They have conducted a mission to the North and are currently undertaking strategic conflict mapping of the region. Ugandan academic institutions are also researching the causes of the conflict, identifying contributing factors and discussing previous attempts at peace. The impact of the media is limited. Media outlets are providing national coverage of local level peace-building initiatives, and they can report on atrocities committed by rebels but not on anything portraying government forces in a negative light.

There are many peace-building activists working at the local level whose efforts aim to support a national level peace process. Some NGOs, such as Center for Conflict Resolution (CECORE), have worked with the *Acholi Religious Leaders' Peace Initiative* to start a dialogue process with the LRA. However, the initiative has been hampered by a lack of trust, which became evident when the UPDF ambushed the LRA when they showed up for the last meeting. The local organisations are currently seeking partners to assist in fundraising, awareness raising, and increasing the level of international advocacy to apply pressure on the Ugandan government to engage in dialogue.

The only international NGO with an active peace-building programme in Uganda is World Vision. They essentially run a support program, where they receive abducted children and rehabilitate them. To encourage acceptance of ex-combatants into communities, World Vision conducts community-level talks or what they call community sensitisation sessions where they discuss issues such as reconciliation and forgiveness and encourage communities to avoid labelling and stigmatisation.

Despite the array of local peace initiatives, they do not address the regional or national dimensions of the conflict. The efforts and response to addressing the conflict are not co-ordinated amongst the different peace actors and there is no consolidated approach for strategic lobbying to increase international awareness and obtain international or regional intervention, in the form of peacekeepers, external mediators or diplomatic sanctions.

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<sup>7</sup> Eliane Duthoit, Head of Office, UN OCHA. Interviewed Oct 10, 2003. Ruth Towers, Kampala, Uganda.  
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