

A Call for Action in Northern Uganda

A report by the Liu Institute for Global Issues

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Assessment Mission to Northern Uganda (February 2002) Report**
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An Update to the Assessment Mission to Northern Uganda of February 2002

PREFACE: This report is a call for urgent action in Northern Uganda. Large numbers of innocent civilians have been killed in the conflict since March 2002, beginning immediately after the February report was issued. The risk of a major humanitarian disaster in the IDP camps and the extreme fear of children of further abductions remain. The international community is called upon to respond beyond an increase of humanitarian assistance to address the situation.

Overview:

Since the Liu Institute for Global Issues released an assessment report on Northern Uganda in February 2002, there has been a significant escalation in violence in the conflict, characterised by serious attacks on displacement camps, killings, road ambushes, child abductions, and looting. Destabilisation has resulted in a renewed policy of forced displacement of civilians into protected villages, which has worsened the humanitarian crisis. A climate of pending crisis is pervading the north. This has changed the context of a major concern in the February report, the challenges and opportunities of a resettlement process. The resettlement of displaced persons has been hampered by the escalation of violence by the Lords' Resistance Army (LRA), and the Ugandan government's military operation code-named 'Operation Iron Fist'.

This Report is based on a mission to Uganda and Kenya in October by the Executive Director of the Liu Institute, the Hon. Lloyd Axworthy; continued consultation with contacts in Uganda; meetings with Canadian NGOs working in northern Uganda, the Canadian government and regular monitoring of the situation. It focuses on key events in 6 major aspects of the conflict: military activities, displacement camps, peace initiatives, the amnesty law, and Uganda-Sudan relations and the economic cost of the conflict.

Military: A major concern of the February 2002 report was the military build up by the UPDF. Media reports were starting to pick up on the possibility of a government orchestrated military operation. Such an operation was being planned at that time, and by April 2002 it was active. Below is a summary of some of the key events:

- In April 2002, the UPDF's Fourth Division began a military operation aimed at uprooting and destroying the LRA, code-named Operation Iron Fist. This has come against strong criticism from groups opposed to a military solution, who believe the operation targets abducted children used as the first line of defence against such attacks.
- The operation has been underway for several months, and has not met with significant success. Some children have been 'rescued' but the fate of many more remain unknown. Yet as a result of operations many more abductions have taken place according to records being compiled and updated by

UNICEF in Uganda. It has also been reported that the moral of the army is low, and many soldiers have been killed in battle.

- There is an increased UPDF inability to protect the civilian population from LRA attacks. This has led to a recent pronouncement of the army giving civilians 24 hours to move into IDP camps without preparation. The UPDF has also stepped up arbitrary arrest and detention of civilians suspected of collaborating with rebels in military barracks. There are also numerous reports of other forms of abuse by the army.
- As the LRA are forced from their bases in Southern Sudan, they return to Uganda where they have broken into small groups. These groups are responsible for the increase in violence over the past few months, including attacks on IDP camps.
- According to a recent study commissioned by civil society groups in Uganda¹, the northern conflict has cost over 1.33 billion dollars which on average represents 3% of annual GDP. This is a major loss for an economy which is 54% funded by external donors.

Displacement Camps/Humanitarian: Given the different military context in February, a desire was expressed among the Acholi to resettle outside of the poor conditions in displacement camps. Indeed, an OCHA report written in March 2002 expressed similar concerns and set out recommendations for the resettlement process. OCHA has created a resettlement plan, however, the current circumstances make its implementation impossible. In the event that the context of the conflict changes, OCHA has expressed an interest in Canadian support for the plan. Presently, more civilians are being forced into displacement camps, while at the same time the increased insecurity has restricted access to NGOs and the UN World Food Programme (WFP). Since late September 2002, there has been no access to humanitarian agencies in Pader district (the worst hit by the current conflict), due to insecurity. As a result, the poor humanitarian situation is quickly worsening into a looming crisis. The following are some of the key events.

- Several attacks on IDP camps have occurred since July 2002. The first occurred on July 5 on the camp at Maaji in Adjumani District. On August 5, the LRA attacked the Acholi-Pii camp in neighbouring Pader District, putting all its 24,000 resident Sudanese refugees to flight and killing at least 60. In the latest attack on September 12, a woman refugee was wounded and 19 other refugees were abducted by a group of about 80 LRA fighters. Several raids on camps and villages resulting in the death and displacement for several thousand civilians in October. Hundreds more children have been abducted during these raids.
- Smaller scale attacks on villages have also continued with impunity. This promoted a BBC report on such attacks, in which many residents were killed with hoes and blunt machetes.
- During the August 5 attack, four IRC aid workers were kidnapped by the LRA. In exchange for their return, the IRC published a statement by the LRA in which it issued an ultimatum to the United Nations and aid agencies to pull out of northern Uganda and southern Sudan by August 14, 2002. In the

¹ CSOPNU, The Net economic cost of the conflict in the Acholiland sub region of Uganda, September, 2002.

statement the LRA also said the attack against the refugee camp was in retaliation for the support of the Sudanese government to Uganda's military campaign against it.

- The escalation in violence has also affected the distribution of relief food aid to the half a million people who depend solely on agencies for food. On September 17, a WFP envoy was attacked, resulting in the death of a WFP driver and the suspension of relief food deliveries. This was the second time that WFP was forced to suspend activities in the area. The present situation of insecurity has limited access to key relief areas for NGOs as well as the World Food Programme. The crisis is said to be worsening by the day.
- As of October 2, villagers in Gulu, Kitgum and Pader have been forced by the UPDF to relocate into displacement camps. This is purportedly for their own protection, and to keep them from being caught in the crossfire. It is also a result of the fact that the LRA have a greater presence in northern Uganda since being chased from their bases in southern Sudan, and the UPDF is worried they could be hiding in the villages. The UPDF has resorted to a 'scorched earth' policy for burning huts and conducting aerial raids on villages in the north.

Peace Initiatives: The past few months have witnessed much talk of peace to end the conflict in northern Uganda. President Museveni contacted LRA Leader Joseph Kony to lay down the government's terms for a ceasefire, created a government peace team to talk to the LRA and established peace zones in the North. There have also been calls for international assistance to address the conflict, including a request for assistance from the Minister for the Presidency. However, there are other mixed signals given that the UPDF has pitched camp in the northern districts to end the insurgency by force.

- In August, President Museveni wrote to LRA leader Joseph Kony laying down the government's terms for peace. The terms of the ceasefire included a commitment by the LRA to stop kidnapping and killing civilians and demanded that the LRA confine itself to three sites in southern Sudan. The conditions were rejected by Joseph Kony, who also set out conditions, which were rejected by the government.
- The main envoys of the peace talks between the government and the LRA are the religious and clan leaders. There have been direct negotiations between the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative and the LRA over the last three months.
- On August 23, following the delivery of the letter to Joseph Kony, President Museveni announced the creation of a peace team to talk to the Lord's Resistance Army, led by Deputy Premier and Minister of Internal Affairs Eriya Kategaya. Member of Parliament Reagan Okumu stated the role of the Peace Team was, 'to bridge the gap between government and rebels so that the two can sit at a round table and negotiate peace.'
- On September 20, the Minister for the Presidency, Prof. Gilbert Bukenya asked foreign envoys to assist in bringing peace to the north. He had a meeting with the Italian, German and American Ambassadors, and stated that Italy should act as a 'catalyst' for this. The Italian Ambassador, Mr. Teucci Maurizio stated that what was needed were facilitators for peace, not an international mediator. The German Ambassador, Mr. Klaus Holderbaum said

that Germany has offered political and financial support to Uganda to assist with peace in the north.

- The establishment of 'peace zones' in northern Uganda was announced by President Museveni on October 3. These zones will allow for the Acholi religious and cultural peace team to engage in dialogue with the LRA. The Presidential Press Secretary Mary Okuruti said the peace zones would be established 'soon.' The peace zones will reportedly also include observers such as the International Red Cross, NGOs and the World Food Programme. To date this has not occurred, and President Museveni has reportedly asked the religious leaders to cease meetings with the rebels.

Amnesty Law: The continuation of Operation Iron Fist has made the implementation of the Amnesty Law complex. It is difficult to gauge the impact of the amnesty law amidst the violence of the LRA and military campaign. Reports have surfaced that children 'rescued' from the LRA have been coerced to return to the bush to fight for the UPDF, or else have returned to the LRA. Below are the key events:

- The Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative released a report in May entitled, 'Seventy times Seven: The Impact of the Amnesty Law in Acholi.' This report is critical of the implementation of the Amnesty Law in northern Uganda, and cites the main problems in implementation to be a lack of political will, and the capacity of local governments and established commissions to implement the policy. Operation Iron Fist has also negatively affected the implementation of the Amnesty Law, as it contradicts the goals and aspirations of amnesty.
- The anti-terrorism legislation, 'Suppression of Terrorism Act' which was recently enacted, also puts the integrity of the amnesty law in question. The Suppression of Terrorism Act defines any act of violence or threat of violence for political, religious, economic and cultural ends as a terrorist act. The current bill carries a mandatory death sentence for those found to be terrorists.

Uganda – Sudan relations: The conflict between the Government of Sudan and SPLA rebels in the south has been waged for many years. The intensity of this conflict increased in recent months, while the introduction of peace talks in September has yielded little. Until March 2002, the LRA's main force was based in Southern Sudan, receiving supplies and equipment from the Sudanese government. After the events of September 11, 2001, increased pressure on Sudan has led to improvement in relations between Kampala and Khartoum with full diplomatic relations being re-established. In March a protocol between Uganda and Sudan was signed under which Kampala was permitted to send troops to government controlled areas of southern Sudan to uproot the LRA. The Sudanese government also cut support to the LRA. This changed the dynamics of the northern Uganda conflict. It has disbursed the LRA into Uganda and the mountains of southern Sudan, largely fighting a war of survival.

- On September 26, the Sudanese government banned all UN relief flights to southern Sudan, which essentially cut off air access from Kenya to the south. This has raised concerns for the welfare of up to 3

million people in the war-ravaged south. In recent days the government forces have launched an offensive against the SPLA

- The Sudanese government also accidentally bombed a UPDF military detachment in southern Sudan. The Sudanese Defence Minister said he regretted the incident and blamed it on the pilots missing their targets.

The Economic Cost of the Conflict: The war in the north has continued to consume large amounts of the national budget of Uganda. A recent study commissioned by the Civil Society Organizations for Peace in Northern Uganda (CSOPNU), has indicated that well over 1.33 billion dollars has been spent on the war over the last 16 years. This represents over 3% of annual GDP. Other losses are related to lack of development in agriculture, livestock, tourism, outward movement of populations, loss of lives, poor education and healthcare. The total loss could be rounded to about US \$100 million a year which represents the equivalent value of the total budget of the World Bank's new Northern Uganda Social Action Fund.

Additional Concerns: Below is an emerging issue that has arisen since the February report was written. A deeper analysis is needed to put such events in proper context.

The death of a prisoner held in Gulu has sparked concerns over the treatment of prisoners in northern Uganda, particularly opposition supporters. Amnesty International has reported that on September 16, 20 prisoners were removed from Gulu Central Prison during a raid by the UPDF. One prisoner, Peter Oloya was shot and killed, and Amnesty International believes this to be an extra judicial execution. Peter Oloya was a campaigner for an opposition candidate, Kizza Besigye.

The Economist cited a claim made by Ugandan officials that Kizza Besigye is organising supporters in Rwanda, potentially in collaboration with the LRA, to launch operations against President Museveni.

- In October, purportedly in response to an article published by the Newspaper "Monitor" which stated that the LRA had shot down an army helicopter, the newspaper was shut down. For six days the Monitor was shut down and police searched the premises. According to an Economist article (October 19, 2002), some suspect that the closure may have been in advance of a renewed attack on the LRA, but Monitor editors believe that the government's aim was to unearth the papers sources.

The Way Forward: Recommendations

1. A consolidated, internationally recognized monitoring and reporting presence is urgently required. The continuing child hostage and abduction situation, the increased hostilities by the LRA, continuation of the military operation and the questionable integrity of the amnesty Law assert the need for a monitoring role in the conflict. This can be done in steps. We recommend the first be through a human rights monitoring mission. As a result of the Uganda visit by Lloyd Axworthy, Director and Chief Executive Officer of the Liu Institute and Jonathan Fanton Chairman of Human Rights Watch and President of the MacArthur Foundation, an initiative has been developed to organize a mission led by Human Rights Watch and supported by a network of local peace groups to provide credible reporting on the extent of the conflict and depth of human rights violations; and provide a comprehensive diagnostic of the situation. Further support to this initiative is recommended to consolidate its impact.
2. Peace structures that currently exist need to be strengthened. Building capacity of existing networks leading to a consolidated, civilian driven peace initiative that can support effective human rights monitoring and contribute to the peace and reconciliation process is badly needed. A representative and responsive peace strategy group comprised of civilians with knowledge of the area and key players at local and national levels would support information sharing and reporting on the conflict. In addition, it can identify and encourage dialogue with dissatisfied groups to limit the ‘spill over’ effect of the conflict. It can also support international efforts towards a peaceful negotiated end to the hostilities and provide a strong, representative civilian voice for peace. A locally driven coalition to support peace processes and provide monitoring in northern Uganda was noted by Stephen Owen in his September 2000 report to the Canadian government.
3. Regardless of the current level of hostilities, much can still be accomplished on reconciliation through work on transitional justice. As noted in the Owen report, this is a situation that in scale and complexity is susceptible to resolution through a series of well planned activities. Given the scale of atrocities committed in this conflict, and given its length, there are no clear precedents. A first step is therefore to support collaboration with local partners in northern Uganda to carry out research on traditional reconciliation processes. While the concept of ‘Mato Oput’ is often stated, little in-depth research has been conducted on this, or any other method of reconciliation and their applicability to the current context. This work would complement current attempts at peace negotiations and conflict resolution. The research would be applied to assist the role of the amnesty commission and help identify and resolve tension between traditional reconciliation and government conflict resolution/peace building.

The need for broad based community dialogue on reconciliation, reconstruction and reintegration is an essential part of the restorative justice

process, as noted in the Owen report. Included in this reconciliation process must be community consultation with children. The situation in northern Uganda offers an unprecedented opportunity to bring together both sides of the conflict –even at this stage. That is because most of the rebels are in fact Acholi children, and many, through a variety of means, have returned to Acholi communities. Herein lies the challenge in northern Uganda: the distinction between perpetrator and victim is blurred, and in most cases the perpetrator is also the victim.

4. Multi-faceted interventions that encompass humanitarian, peacebuilding and development needs are urgently required. Although discussions around resettlement have been hampered by more immediate security and humanitarian concerns, it is important that increased emergency responses be designed to strengthen capacity and plant the seeds for sustainable development. Achieving coherence between humanitarian and longer term development should begin now. One approach recommended is UNHCR's bridging strategy for repatriation, reintegration, rehabilitation and reconstruction.
5. It is imperative that the international community, especially the UN and those governments active in this area, as well as the African Union, offer assistance to the Ugandan government in the areas outlined above: support for existing peace groups and structures, reconciliation and community dialogue which can lay the foundation for sustainable peace, and increased multi-faceted development assistance with a strategy for longer term post-conflict development to ensure meaningful reconstruction of the region.