



The Ugandan Conflict Taylor Whelan

Nestled in the heart of Sub-Saharan Africa is a country in the throes of a conflict which threatens the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. For twenty years the Ugandan government and a rebel group based in northern Uganda and South Sudan, called the Lords Resistance Army, or LRA, have been engaged in a conflict, with often tragic results. Now, with no clear agenda, the LRA has entered peace talks with the Government of Uganda for the second time in two years, but talks have recently stalled, with criticism leveled at both sides for a lack of commitment to the talks. The state of northern Uganda is desperate, with recent atrocities committed by the LRA, and upwards of 1.6 million displaced persons living in refugee camps. Until the stalled peace talks produce some tangible results, the outlook for the people of northern Uganda is bleak.

Like others in Africa, the conflict in northern Uganda has roots in the country's colonial past. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century the British administered the territory of Uganda. The colonial government encouraged economic growth in the south of the country while largely ignoring the north region. Because of their reduced economic state when compared with the south, the people living in the north, largely dominated by an ethnic group known as the Acholi, became the main suppliers of manual labor and military manpower to the Ugandan government. Thus when an Acholi General, Tito Okello, stage a coup d'etat in 1985, he received the overwhelming support of the army leadership. Okello's reign was brief: just six months after Okello came to power his government was overthrown by Yoweri Museveni and his National Resistance Army, or NRA. This would spark the long and brutal conflict in northern Uganda.

The defeat of Okello's government and the dominance of the NRA caused great concern among the Acholi that their overarching control over the military was coming to an end. The Acholi also feared retribution by the NRA for some of the brutal tactics they had used to subdue the population following the coup. These were the seeds of what eventually developed into a full blown insurgency, led by the Lord's Resistance Army.

In 1987, Acholi Joseph Kony made his first claims of being a spirit medium, who could communicate with the spirits of Acholi tradition. Kony was persuaded by Odong Latek, a commander of the army of the overthrown government, to adopt guerilla tactics. Kony soon became the leader of the Acholi insurgency movement in the north, known as the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). The LRA at first enjoyed some support from the local population in light of the fact that some NRA factions were known to commit brutal acts to quell the population. The LRA quickly lost popular support, however, when in 1991 they mutilated numerous Acholi who they believed were supporters of Museveni's government. The civilian population has since endured brutal attacks by the LRA,

including mutilation, rape, mass murder, and kidnapping of children for use as child soldiers.

The relationships of Museveni's government with Western nations, especially the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, Norway, Denmark, and The Netherlands, are very friendly, and up until recently, these countries ignored the situation in the north of the country. Uganda has been praised for their economic recovery after independence, their education programs, their democratization, women's rights, and attention to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. However, Museveni has indicated he does not see the north as an important part of Uganda, and because of this attitude, questions have been raised as to whether the government of Uganda's desire for an end to the conflict with the LRA is genuine. Recent reports have indicated that the national army's (now called the Uganda Peoples Defence Forces, or UPDF) heavy-handed tactics when dealing with the LRA may include human rights violations, and the NRA has freely admitted recruiting child soldiers who have escaped from the LRA. Many observers state these factors have much to do with failed peace talks in the past.

Both sides have met sporadically for over a decade to engage in peace talks, but these talks have produced few results. The most recent round of talks have been held in Juba, South Sudan, and mediated by Riek Machar, the Vice-President of South Sudan. The talks, which began in July 2006, led to a cease-fire being signed on August 26th. Under the peace treaty the rebel LRA forces were to assemble at two points in Southern Sudan, and the UPDF would not attack them. This agreement would allow for more comprehensive peace talks to be undertaken, once LRA forces had assembled at the designated locations.

It has been reported that up to 600 rebels had made their way to the two designated assembly areas when UPDF forces began to advance upon one of them, violating the agreement. The LRA forces then withdrew from the advance of the UPDF soldiers, leading to accusations that they had also violated the agreement. The LRA has recently stated that all of its forces will proceed to the second assembly point, which has produced worry in the UPDF that all the LRA soldiers will be at one point together. Also recently, several attacks on the civilian population near Juba in Southern Sudan were blamed on the LRA, and only later it was revealed that the attacks were carried out by forces from northern Sudan, commanded out of Khartoum. This again shows how misinformation and violations by both sides have led to the failure of negotiations.

As is evidenced by recent developments, the peace talks are far from delivering a multilateral agreement.

Some observers have cited the huge difference in negotiating parties for the disappointing results. The LRA is led by a spiritual leader who's only policy statement is ruling Uganda according to the ten commandments, and who has refused to attend peace talks for fear of



Agoro internally displaced persons (IDP) camp in northern Uganda, Kitgum District

being arrested on charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity, sending instead negotiators who have little sway within the LRA. Museveni, on the other hand, is the democratically elected leader of Uganda, albeit with some concerns raised as to the validity of the recently held elections. Museveni's popularity is waning in the north however, and a peace agreement would boost his appeal. Kony faces a war crimes tribunal at The Hague if he turns up for negotiations, yet another barrier to the peace talks.

The Ugandan government has been praised for its programs to reduce the prevalence of HIV/AIDS within the country. According to UNAIDS, prevalence rates have been reduced by as much as 20% in the most vulnerable demographics: for example, antenatal clinic attendee prevalence rates fell from 31% in 1990 to 8.3% in 2002. However, this claim has received criticism from the international community, including the medical journal *The Lancet*, due to the methodology used in coming to the conclusions. Critics suggest that the estimates are derived from the prevalence rates in urban centers, and do not take into account the rates in more rural parts of the country, where 90% of the people live, and also do not take into account the close to 2 million refugees living in camps in the north and in neighboring South Sudan.



Although the war may end, its effects will be felt for years to come

Because the refugee camps are frequently raided by LRA forces, which are now mostly based in South Sudan, humanitarian efforts are difficult. Until the peace talks produce some tangible result in the form of a cessation of hostilities by both parties, and until the refugees are allowed to return to their homes, the crisis in Uganda will become increasingly urgent.