



Department of Social Development and World Peace Office of International Justice and Peace

Background on Northern Uganda February 2007

“The war in northern Uganda, which started in August 1986, has posed a serious challenge to all of us, the people of Uganda. The loss of so many human lives, the maiming and disfiguring of so many people, the disappearance of so many young and innocent children, the destruction of property and the resultant poverty are all a cause of great shame to our country and to our conscience. We can never, never keep silent on this great evil in our country. We can never say enough has been done to restore peace. We can never give up the search for peaceful means to end this long and bitter war.” – Catholic Bishops of Uganda, Easter 2004

Background to the Conflict

For the past 21 years, the people of northern Uganda have endured a brutal conflict involving the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), the Government of Uganda, the Government of Sudan, and others. The roots of the conflict lie in economic inequality between northern and southern Uganda. The conflict is exacerbated by the perceived political marginalization of the northern Acholi people after Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni’s assumption of power in 1986. By the 1990s, however, the LRA rebellion that had started as a northern movement against the government of Uganda had devolved into a pseudo-mystical terrorist operation. The LRA was largely funded by the Government of Sudan and sustained itself by kidnappings of children in northern Uganda and southern Sudan. The LRA captured more than 30,000 children over the past two decades. These children have been held hostage as soldiers, sex slaves, and bondservants, with many forced to kill loved ones to break off family relations and dissuade future desertions. To avoid this grim fate, an estimated 35,000 “night commuters” walk miles each evening from their villages to sleep in the relative safety of town centers.

Today, approximately 1.4 million people remain displaced from their homes in fetid camps for internally displaced persons (IDP). The Acholi region has suffered the most. Although Ugandan military (UPDF) protection of IDP camps has improved since 2004, the most recent UN mortality studies reported an estimated 1,000 IDPs dying each week from disease and lack of access to adequate health care and clean water. In addition, girls and young women routinely suffer sexual and physical abuse. As improving security conditions in parts of northern Uganda allow for the return of some IDPs to their homes, there is an increasing need for the Government of Uganda to guarantee freedom of movement and to restore regional agricultural capabilities.

The ongoing conflict has the potential to destabilize the broader region. The LRA retains a sizeable presence in southern Sudan, threatening the fragile north/south Sudanese peace accords signed in January 2005. More recently, the LRA created a base in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), a country that over the past ten years has experienced the worst human-rights catastrophe since the Second World War with more than 4 million fatalities.

Peace talks between the Government of Uganda and the LRA have occurred intermittently since the early 1990s. In light of increased Ugandan/Sudanese cooperation, local and international advocacy and reconciliation efforts, and recent peace overtures from the LRA and the Government of Uganda, the potential for lasting peace and security has improved. The international community needs to step forward to help secure peace and initiate reconstruction. Negotiations sponsored by the Government of South Sudan in Juba offer some hope of bringing this conflict to an end, but there are divisions among community leaders and victims over the competing claims of reconciliation and justice in reaching that goal. The talks are organized around five agenda items: 1) a cessation of hostilities and LRA assembly at two points in south Sudan, 2) economic and political development of Northern Uganda and political participation, 3) accountability and justice, 4) a cease-fire, and 5) disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation and reintegration. Thus far negotiating parties have only agreed on the first agenda item and the talks have currently stalled with the LRA’s demand for a new venue. A key question is whether perpetrators of violence will be prosecuted or given amnesty as part of a peace agreement.

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Since the inception of the talks in July 2006, security in Northern Uganda has improved slightly and people have been slowly moving to areas outside of the internally displaced camps. IDPs are reluctant, however, to return home as there has been no comprehensive agreement reached between the LRA and the Government of Uganda.

USCCB's Relationship with Northern Uganda

As far back as 1999, USCCB helped to organize inter-religious peace initiatives for northern Uganda, hosting a delegation of Acholi religious leaders to discuss the needed parameters for restoring security in northern Uganda. Then-president of USCCB, Bishop Wilton Gregory, visited Kampala in 2002, meeting with Archbishop John Baptist Odama of Gulu to discuss the escalating conflict in northern Uganda. Since that time, USCCB bishops and staff have met regularly with Archbishop Odama to stay abreast of the pastoral and humanitarian situation in the war-torn area. After a 2004 CRS/USCCB trip to northern Uganda and southern Sudan, the Conference in 2005 hosted the international "African Bishops' Peacebuilding Workshop," dedicated to developing models for church-based peace-building and conflict resolution efforts throughout Africa.

Catholic Relief Services has operated in Uganda since the 1960s. The U.S. Bishops' official international relief and development agency opened a permanent office in Uganda in October 1996 and now operates a regional office in the Gulu district. CRS is currently participating in the U.S. Agency for International Development's Community Resilience and Dialogue Consortium, providing psychosocial rehabilitation, conflict resolution, HIV/AIDS services and inter-religious reconciliation initiatives to the people of northern Uganda. Other programs include food security, water and sanitation and efforts to mitigate the effects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on orphans and other vulnerable children.

USCCB Policy:

USCCB believes that robust leadership by the United States can contribute to peace in northern Uganda. The U.S. government should:

- **Support a political resolution of the conflict:** The Juba talks represent a historic opportunity for the people of Uganda and cannot be allowed to fail. The U.S. should publicly support the talks as well as appropriate increased resources for mediation, justice system reform, peace incentive packages for combatants, and community reconciliation efforts. The United States Government should also coordinate with and support the newly appointed UN Envoy for Northern Uganda, Joaquim Chissano, Mozambique's former president.
- **Prioritize civilian protection:** Although IDP morbidity rates have fallen slightly from where they were a year ago when estimates were that 1,000 people were dying each week, it is critical that the U.S. Government invest additional financial and diplomatic resources with two goals in mind:
 - 1) improving the health and security conditions in the IDP camps and if violence begins again, the U.S. should work with the Government of Uganda to ensure civilians are adequately protected; and
 - 2) encouraging the Government of Uganda to provide more robust security for IDPs returning to their homes when it is safe to do so.
- **Appoint a U.S. Special Envoy for northern Uganda.** The envoy should travel to the region to see the crisis firsthand, demonstrate its priority status for the U.S., and promote a broad, inclusive process of political reconciliation.

Resources: Please visit this link at CRS for helpful background information on the historical, political, and humanitarian context of the northern Uganda conflict: www.crs.org/get_involved/advocacy/grass_roots/uganda.cfm. In addition, the entire text of the Ugandan bishops' 2004 Easter pastoral can be located at www.fides.org/eng/vita_chiesa/vescovi_uganda130504.html.

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