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Northern Uganda

How Kampala kept conflict off global agenda

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One year after peace talks between the Uganda government and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) started in July 2006 in the Southern Sudanese capital of Juba, addressing wartime atrocities in northern Uganda remains a daunting challenge. The Juba talks are widely viewed as "the best-ever opportunity" to peacefully end the 20-year old war, which has claimed over 100,000 lives, displaced more than 1.8 million people, and cost the taxpayer \$1.7 billion, or \$85 million annually.

AFRICAN INSTITUTIONS AND UGANDA'S NEIGHBOURS MUST NOW STEP UP THEIR SUPPORT for the Juba talks to come up with an effective mechanism to redress past abuses, violations and entrenched socio-economic inequalities in northern Uganda. A recent report by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights calls attention to the importance of a multifaceted transitional justice mechanism in bringing lasting peace to northern Uganda.

The report, titled *Making Peace Our Own: Victims Perception of Accountability, Reconciliation and Transitional Justice in Northern Uganda* (August 14 2007), censures the government and the LRA alike for atrocities against civilians. But the report's magisterial position is unlikely to go down well with Uganda's governing elite.

For decades now, Kampala's pundits have played on the widespread outcry against the LRA cruelty and carnage to wring international endorsement for the government's hardnosed military blitzes in the north. But these pacification operations have often wreaked more havoc on civilians than on the elusive rebel fighters.

Northern Ugandans have known no peace since the abortive 1985 Nairobi Peace Agreement (chided by critics as the "Nairobi peace jokes") between Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Movement/Army and the mainly Acholi military junta of Tito Okello that deposed Milton Obote.

The NRA's swift victory over the remnants of Okello's army in 1986, and over Alice Lakwena's Holy Spirit Movement (HSM) in 1987, however, gave a brazenly militaristic hue to Kampala's response to religio-military cults that sprung in the north.

In the words of one analyst, "Every one of the [Uganda People's Defence Force] UPDF commanders posted to the North has issued his own a timetable of when he intends to win the war." The LRA not only emerged as the best known of the 22 armed groups that have waged a bush war against the government in the north, but over time, developed into the proverbial hard-to-slay hydra. A series of massive operations, including the 1991 "Operation North" and

Even youth militias such as the Arrow Boys and Amuka Group, which were reportedly mobilized by NRA politicians, failed to make a significant dent on the insurgency. These setbacks compelled the government to climb-down from an all-out military approach in favour of a negotiated deal, albeit on its own terms. But Kampala hardliners continued to pursue a solution by force. THIS OBDURATE QUEST FOR a battlefield victory sealed the fate of a series of peace initiatives — Betty Bigombe (1993), the Community of Sant'Egidio (1997-2004), the Acholi Religious Leaders' Peace Initiative (2002– 2003), and yet another attempt by Bigombe (2004–2005).

The thrust of Kampala's regional strategy has been to keep Africa's emerging peace and security structures at bay for sovereignty and prestige reasons. In that regard, it has portrayed the northern conflict as a "localized LRA rebellion," which it is internally able to bring to heel. That way, it has prevented the dispute from becoming an item on the agenda of regional bodies. From mid-2004, the government has been fending off the idea by members of the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA) for a regional multi-national force to protect civilians in northern Uganda. "Uganda is too conscious of its sovereignty to allow an East African force on its territory," says a Ugandan EAC legislator.

In 2005-2006, Uganda served as chair of the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (Igad), widely acclaimed for its efforts to find solutions to festering conflicts in Southern Sudan and Somalia and host to the Eastern Brigade of the African Union's Africa Standby Force (ASF).

During its tenure, Uganda kept the conflict in the North off Igad's agenda, and Igad out of the Juba peace process. The powerful African Union Peace and Security Council, launched in 2004, never went beyond joining the chorus of international condemnations of LRA atrocities, and commiserating with Kampala.

Even as the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) described northern Uganda as one of the world's worst humanitarian disasters, the AU omitted northern Uganda from its extensive register of conflict situations in Africa.

On its part, Kampala drew regional attention away from its own crisis in the north by propping up its own image as a regional peacemaker, utilizing "its own experience" in northern Uganda to restore peace in war-torn countries like Somalia.

In 2006, it pushed for a 10,000-strong Igad stabilization force in Somalia and the lifting of the UN arms embargo on the Transitional Federal Government (TFG). In early 2007, it dispatched 1,800 troops as part of an African Union peacekeeping force, and some 250 military experts to train the Somali army.

Kampala's strategists have utilized the international factor to win moral and military backing for its counter-insurgency. The government's strategy of heaping all responsibility for atrocities to the rebels has been aided by the LRA's own terror tactics and barbarous brutality. The tales of LRA's beating and killing of innocent civilians, abduction of children as child soldiers and sex-slaves (estimated at between 20,000 and 40,000) and cutting off the noses, ears and lips of its victims attracted widespread condemnation.

This dismay has pushed atrocities linked to the government's iron-fisted military strategy below the radar, and ensured that it is seldom called to account for the humanitarian costs of its activities. The LRA rebellion was viewed as an assault on an icon of the "new generation of African leadership" in Uganda, touted by the World Bank and IMF orthodoxy as a shining model of an emerging liberal state in "anarchic" Africa.

This, however, was before President Museveni's magic waned after he removed the curb on presidential tenure to run for a third term in 2006. Unlike similar deadly internal conflicts in Cote

d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Darfur and Southern Sudan, the northern Uganda crisis never attracted serious attention from the UN Security Council. After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on the US, Uganda seized on the hysteria created by the global "war on terror" to persuade the world's lone superpower to include the LRA in its list of terrorist organizations.

It also succeeded in getting the International Criminal Court to issue arrest warrants against LRA's top five leaders — Joseph Kony, his deputy Vincent Otti, and Commanders Raska Lukwiya, Okot Odiambo and Dominic Ongwen — and charge them with crimes against humanity and war crimes, including murder, rape, sexual slavery and enlisting of children as combatants.

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