

## **NORTHERN UGANDA: SITUATIONAL REPORT MID-APRIL 2004.**

### **A BORING WAR?**

When writing about the 18-year old war in Northern Uganda it is difficult not to be repetitive. Ambushes, abductions and killings continue to be the order of the day with little variation. The Government also keeps on repeating very similar things about deadlines, large number of rebels killed and a military victory soon at hand. We are presenting here our recent chronology since February 2004 (not exhaustive) in order to let facts speak for themselves. In addition, we also present a few highlights:

#### **A growing international attention**

Mr. Egeland's visit to Northern Uganda in November 2003 has marked a turning point in the international community's commitment to this region. The UN has placed some international staff in Gulu and not a week goes by without some foreign delegation visiting the three main "hot spots": Gulu, Lira and Kitgum. In addition, the donor group's statement read out in front of Parliament by the EU head of delegation Mr. Sigurd Illing asking for the North to be declared a disaster zone –echoing earlier calls by the Uganda Parliament- and reiterating appeals for a negotiated end of the conflict has been an encouraging signal that the diplomatic community shares some similar views about this war. ARLPI's view is that local and international stakeholders should go beyond regarding this tragedy as a mere internal or local issue.

A recent one-month advocacy visit to the US, Canada, London and Brussels led by Archbishop Odama and Paramount Chief Rwot Achana greatly contributed to raising the profile of the issues affecting us.

The Community of Sant'Egidio has been present in Gulu four times (April 2003, November 2003, January 2004 and February 2004), making some discreet efforts to engage the LRA into a peaceful solution. Also the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue and the US-sponsored Northern Uganda Peace Initiative (NUPI) have been trying to break the ground.

Northern Uganda seems to be finally gaining access to the international agenda. Following the Barlonyo massacre on 21st February more and more international journalists are visiting the area, although no international media house is still present on a permanent basis.

#### **Rebels killed, children killed.**

At the end of December 2003 the UPDF said that they estimated the number of rebels to be around 350. According to their own statements, by mid-March the number of rebels killed stands at 344. This types of blunders are not unusual in the military propaganda that most Uganda media repeat rather uncritically. Eye-witnesses reports tell us a different story: On the 6th March we interviewed a 15-year old girl who had been in rebel captivity for a year. She was in a Gulu hospital being treated for bomb blast injuries. According to her, about ten days earlier the rebel group she was with was bombed by an Army helicopter and thirty children died. Also, around the same dates, on the 28th February, one of the Aboke girls abducted in 1996, Jessica by name, died in a similar battle at Got Ojwang, in Lira district. Her five-year old child, strapped to her back, survived. She was the oldest to be killed in the group. The Army reported that day that they had killed 36 rebels.

If we link these tragic deaths to the fact that abductions continue, we see the deadly cycle of children abducted – killed either by the LRA or in Army confrontations – more abductions... continues unabated. While military action can be justified for the sake of protection and defending people's lives, it is clear that the price of a purely military solution is unacceptably high.

The Uganda media does not report much these days about abductions, but that does not mean that they have stopped: On the 10th March 15 children were abducted in Omiya-Pacwa and 28 in Kalongo (both places in Pader district). At least 30 more were abducted that week in Bar Dege and Layibi neighbourhoods in the outskirts of Gulu. And many more unreported cases keep on happening in other places

### **Ethnic tension. Myth or reality?**

Since last year's LRA raids in Lango anti-Acholi sentiments have been breeding quietly, mainly in Lira district. According to Church sources there over 560 people have been killed by the LRA since November 2003 to the end of February 2004. Most of these killings have taken place in unofficial displaced persons camps North and East of Lira where conditions are appalling. Also according to the same sources, 48 people have died of hunger in Barapwo camp and 38 in Erute camp since January. Since most LRA fighters are Acholi, many Langi find it easy to vent their anger and frustration at the whole tribe. A march of protest in Lira on the 25th February degenerated into rioting and five people were killed. It turned out that only one of them was an Acholi and the other four died when the Police fired shots as they were harassed by angry crowds. Sadly, this provoked a revenge reaction by some gangs of youth in Gulu town. Thankfully, this was swiftly brought under control by the Police.

The ethnic tension is likely not as serious as some segments of the national and international media report, but the issue is not trivial either and these incidents serve as an early warning of what could develop if the situation is not handled wisely. Reports of Amuka Lango militia present at some displaced camps in Acholi are causing fear. The religious leaders from Acholi, Lango and Teso met in Kampala on the 2nd of March and in Lira on 23rd – 24th March. The MPs from the same sub-regions met too on the 11th. These initiatives are commendable and should play a significant role in putting out potential fires of inter-ethnic hatred before it is too late.

### **Other stories. Returnees' silent recruitment, militias.**

As is usually the case, the "hawks" still seem to have the upper hand over the "doves" as far as the resolution of the conflict is concerned. Recruitment of militias continues, with Kitgum being the latest district to launch the "Frontier Guards". Recruitment is generally voluntary, although there are still big question marks about rebels who surrender (most of whom joined the LRA by abduction). Some of these people never find their way to reception centres and are under a good deal of psychological pressure to join the government forces.

Since March the LRA has come under heavy attack by the SPLA and, reportedly, by the EDF pro-Khartoum militia, inside Sudan. The UPDF has also gone again on the offensive in the area of the Imatong mountains.

## **SOME RECENT CHRONOLOGY**

### **FEBRUARY 2004**

1st – Rebels killed six civilians in Patira (Anaka).

Army killed 14 rebels near Geregere (Pader) in a fierce battle.

Army rounded up several thousand male adults in Pabbo camp starting before dawn. A fire broke out, detainees stampeded (five injured) and up to the 3rd Feb. More than 2000 huts were burnt down.

3rd – Rebels burnt down Koc Ongako barracks and displaced camp during the night. Eleven people and eight injured.

Rebels abducted 16 children in Layibi Go Down.

- 4th - Rebels ambushed vehicle at Aparo (Kitgum). A child and a rebel were killed.  
Rebels killed two cyclists at Pawidi (Kitgum)  
Rebels killed 60 at Abiya displaced camp, 27 km North East of Lira on Abala road. Seventy other people were wounded and 200 huts burnt down. The attack took place from 5 to 9 pm.
- 6th – After several days of fire, the number of huts burnt down in Pabbo reached 5,000.  
Rebels killed four people on the road between Kitgum and Padibe.
- 7th – Rebels killed 15 people in Abako camp in Lira district.
- 9th – Delegation of three Italian Senators, invited by ARLPI, visited Gulu.  
10th – The Monitor published that the Army wanted Fr. Carlos out of the country.  
Italian senators met with Vice-President Bukenya and with President Museveni. He rejected a UN intervention force but said he favoured a third party intervention by Saint Egidio.
- 12th – ARLPI presented a Position Paper on the Amnesty Law in front of the Parliamentary Committee on Defence and Internal Affairs.
- 13th – A rebel ambush in Paibwor (Kitgum) killed five.  
Army Commander Maj. General Aronda launched “Frontier Guards” militia in Kitgum.
- 14th – 15th – St. Egidio representatives visited Gulu in an effort to re-establish contact with the LRA.  
Save the Children opposed move to take LRA leadership to the ICC.
- 17th – St. Egidio representatives re-established phone contact with Col. Sam Kolo.  
Swedish Minister for International Co-operation visited Gulu.
- 18th – Archbishop Odama and Bishop Ochola concluded Europe advocacy tour.  
Uganda Amnesty Commission opposed move to take LRA leadership to the ICC.
- 19th – UPDF said it killed 63 rebels in two separate battles in Pader district.
- 21st – Rebels killed more than 200 displaced persons in Barlonyo (Ogur) in Lira district and burnt down the whole camp.  
23rd – Rebels ambushed a Gulu Caritas vehicle at Paiula, killed an accountant and injured two other staff.
- 24th – Army said it killed 21 rebels in a battle in Lira.
- 25th – Anti-Kony demonstration in Lira degenerated into riots. Five killed. Ethnic tensions between Lango and Acholi flared up.  
Parliament asked Government to declare North disaster area.
- 26th – Government turned down Parliament proposal.  
Rebels killed three in Kep (Minakulu).
- 27th – Parliament delegation headed by the Speaker visited Gulu to show solidarity.  
In an address to Parliament EU head of delegation Sigurd Illing said that donors should not be blamed for Kony war and reiterated calls to negotiated end of the conflict.

US State Department report stated that 3,000 people died during 2003 as a result of the Northern Uganda war.

28th – Army said it killed 36 rebels in helicopter bombings in Pader.  
Newly elected CoU Archbishop Henry Orombi visited Gulu with Anglican bishops.

## **MARCH 2004**

2nd – Religious leaders from Acholi, Lango and Teso met in Kampala to discuss peace issues.

3rd – LRA came under heavy attack from the SPLA inside Sudan.  
US Ambassador Jimmy Kolker visited Kitgum.

4th – Museveni stated that Northern Uganda was not a disaster area.

6th – Betty Bigombe visited Gulu.  
Vincent Ottii and Kony rang Archbishop Odama and talked for 30 minutes.

8th – Rebels attacked Teoboro camp in Lira and killed nine people.

10th – Rebels abducted 15 in Omiya-Pacwa and 28 near Kalongo (Pader district). At least 30 were abducted in Gulu suburbs (Layibi and Bar-Dege).

13th – Army said it had killed 104 rebels since the beginning of March.  
In a meeting with MPs from Northern Uganda Museveni he rejected calls to declare North a disaster area and promise to change situation in two months.

14th – UPDF said it had started new anti-LRA offensive inside South Sudan.

15th – Rebels killed nine people in Odidil displaced camp in Katakwi district.  
UNICEF official said that death toll in Barlonyo rebel attack could reach 337.

16th – Top WFP delegation visited Gulu.  
Soldiers forced people to start a camp around Lacor Seminary.  
A District Health Services vehicle was ambushed in Lugore (Gulu). Two soldiers were killed.

17th – Donor countries to OCHA delegation visited Gulu.  
In a night attack to Kitgum suburbs rebels killed four in Corner Lango.  
Three soldiers were killed in a rebel ambush between Cwero and Paicho.  
Forced displacements in Lira districts by the Army. They forced people to leave their villages and small camps to move to bigger gazetted camps.

19th – UPDF said it killed 56 rebels as they tried to enter from Bibia. Several hundreds entered inside Uganda.

20th – UPDF said Sudan had allowed them to use airforce against LRA inside their territory.  
Rebels killed 30 in an attack in Lira Palwo.  
British MPs tabled proposal for UK gov. To declare Northern Uganda a disaster area.

21st- Abductions in Adyeda, Adak (Omor county, Gulu). Three killed.  
23rd – 24th – Religious leaders from Acholi, Lango and Teso met in Lira and asked Government to declare North a disaster area and to pursue peaceful dialogue to end the

conflict.

24th – In a night attack rebels beat to death 11 people in Apoka village, 15 kms north of Lira town.

25th – Army Commander Maj. Gen. Aronda Nyakairima said that most LRA soldiers, with the exception of Kony and few others, had sneaked back into Uganda.

26th – Rebels ambushed a vehicle in Pawidi (Kitgum), killing three.

Human Rights Watch published a report accusing the Uganda security organs of using torture to deter opposition members.

27th – In a meeting with diplomats in Lira President Museveni said that the Government was ready for peace talks with the rebels if they stopped attacks on civilians.

28th – Rebels ambushed a CRS vehicle in Okol (Kitgum) and killed two.

29th – Rebels attacked Akilok (Kitgum) and killed eight.

Rebels abducted and killed three women on the road to Alero.

30th – Army spokesman said that Kony had ordered Sam Kolo to initiate peace talks and that the UPDF rejected the offer.

Rebels killed nine people in Aloji camp (Lira)

Fr. Luciano Fulvi was murdered in Layibi (Gulu).

## **APRIL 2004**

2nd – Army spokesman repeated threats that Fr. Carlos had to leave the country.

3rd – According to the “New Vision” a UN panel of experts in New York condemned the LRA and branded it as a terrorist organisation.

4th – Five people died in the camp in Atyak as the Army fired, allegedly to rebels who were about to attack.

5th – ARLPI and Rwot Acana published appeal for a third-party mediation in Northern conflict. British Secretary of State for International Development Hillary Benn visited Gulu, met with ARLPI and called for use of peaceful means to solve the conflict. He insisted in a “local solution”.

6th – Archbishop Odama announced –during Fr. Ochaya’s funeral- that Kony called him on 6th March and said he was ready for peace talks.

7th – Cardinal Wamala warned of possibility of genocide in Northern Uganda and called for UN intervention.

12th – Canadian Ambassador to the WFP visited Gulu.

## **NORTHERN UGANDA: ISSUES OF CONCERN. MARCH 2004**

### **1. Misrepresentation of the situation of violence.**

As it has been the case so many times during these 18 years, the Government keeps repeating that the war is practically over. The high level of violence on the ground, however, tells a different story. Minimising the problem in the North has always been a very negative factor that has only prolonged the conflict. The international media has no permanent presence in Northern Uganda, a good reason why our problem is still to a great extent shrouded in silence.

## **2. Use of peaceful means, like negotiation, to end the conflict.**

There is lack of will by both the Government of Uganda and the LRA to end the conflict peacefully. The LRA continues to kill innocent civilians in most brutal ways every time it can. The Government appears to be encouraged to pursue a military solution with some assistance from the US provided in exchange for Uganda's support for fight against international terrorism. The announcement by the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) on 29th January that it would collect evidence for a possible prosecution of the LRA leadership may close the path for a peaceful negotiation, although the ICC seems to be making some commendable efforts to understand the real situation from civil society groups on the ground and this may give them a different perspective.

## **3. Mass displacement into unprotected camps.**

There are more than 1,500,000 displaced in the region. It is widely believed that the Government of Uganda is unable or unwilling to protect the internally displaced persons, who are frequently attacked by the LRA. The situation of 200,000 people in unofficial camps North and East of Lira, who have only recently started to receive some medical attention by MSF and some food from the WFP –which lacked protection for their humanitarian convoys- is totally appalling. Also, people are afraid that the situation in the camps is becoming a permanent way of living for the Acholi. Some schemes presented as development projects in the IDPs are increasing this mistrust among the displaced.

## **4. Threats to amend the Amnesty Law.**

In recent months the Government of Uganda has intimated that it would amend the Amnesty Law (passed in January 2000) to exclude the top LRA leaders. Although it was finally extended in its original form on 17th January 2004 –this time only for three months-, the Government has announced that it will work to have the text amended when its next extension is due. This is already having a very negative effect in luring rebels into peaceful negotiation to end the war. ARLPI presented a position paper in front of the Parliamentary Committee on Defence and Internal Affairs on the 12th February, asking for the unconditional extension of the Amnesty. Hopefully, this should happen on 16th April.

## **5. Growing tension between Acholi and Lango/Teso.**

When the LRA infiltrated into Lango and Teso during the second half of 2003 the Government of Uganda responded by creating local militias as a means to deal with the insecurity. The perception of many people on the ground is that this is an Acholi war and that the Acholis are the ones attacking them.

## **6. Use of children in the conflict**

Most LRA fighters are either recently abducted children or youngsters who were abducted a number of years ago and have grown into the rebel camps. Also, despite denials by the Ugandan Army, a good number of young people under age have been recruited into the Local Defence Forces and the UPDF. Some abducted children who escape from the LRA and are handled by the UPDF are also pressurised into joining the Ugandan Army.

