

SITUATIONAL REPORT. MID- JANUARY 2004

1. The Official Version. Déjà vu

If one wishes to understand what is happening in Northern Uganda the first approach can be to digest the official version given by the Ugandan Government, particularly the UPDF. Information published during the second half of December 2003 and the first half of January 2004 could be resumed in this way: the LRA has been defeated and they are fleeing to Sudan, where very soon with the forthcoming peace agreement they will no longer be able to find sanctuary and a supply of weapons. The last six months of 2003 were peaceful in Acholiland and the rebels who terrorised Lango and Teso have been flushed out from those areas thanks to the efforts of their leaders to mobilise the people against the LRA. Many rebels have been killed or have surrendered and many abductees have been rescued. Soon the top leaders of the LRA will be issued with international arrest warrants and that will be their end.

Most people in Acholi would respond to this by saying that for the last 18 years they have heard many similar statements, including deadlines indicating the end of the war, but the violence has continued. This deeply-rooted experiences makes them remain skeptical in front of such statements.

2. Contradictory figures and disturbing questions

Taking a different approach, we could say that during the 18 years of the war in Northern Uganda one of the lessons that people on the ground have learned is the need for been cautious every time that official versions announce that the end of the war is at hand, or even that the war is over (the last time was on the 26th January at the liberation day function in Gulu, by the 4th Division Commander). One of the characteristics of this violent conflict is its intermitent nature: periods of relative calm followed by outbursts of high violence. Also, for whatever reason the LRA has demonstrated an amazing capacity to reorganise itself and hit back with renewed brutality, even in circumstances in which one may think that they were on the brink of disappearing.

We could illustrate this point with some interesting figures: On the 20th December 2002 the Army spokesmen (and later on President Museveni himself) announced that only about 420 rebels remained active. On the 30th December 2003 the Army spokesmen gave the following figures of their military successes: 824 rebels killed, 279 captured and 434 surrendered. Taking these latest figures we get a figure of 1,537 rebels been put "out of action". If one compares with the early figure of 420 remaining rebels it certainly makes no sense to say that the Army has killed them four times over.

Yet, something very similar has been said at the end of December 2003. On the 10th December Museveni announced that there were only about seven groups of rebels with about fifty armed men each (350 in total). In mid- January 2004 the Army spokesman has said that since the beginning of the year the Army has killed already 82 of them and that 40 have surrendered. If this figures are reliable, at the present rate the war should be over in a matter of very few weeks.

The lack of logic in comparing these figures, together with the many witnesses of people who have returned from the rebels gives a very different -and tragic- picture: that a huge number of innocent abductees are killed during armed confrontations with the UPDF, particularly when they are bombed by helicopter gunships. At the same time the LRA continues to abduct children, and the deadly cycle of abductions-children killed-new abductions goes on and on. Army officers

admitted -privately- that eleven children died during the fierce battle in which rebel commander Tolbert Nyeko was allegedly killed near Atanga on 19th January. Also, a foreign journalist who visited the scene of a serious battle in Opatte on 6th Jan. Saw two dead bodies of children.

UNICEF has calculated that since June 2002 up to the end of October 2003 at least 10,000 persons, mostly children, have been abducted. This is on top of the early figure of 24,000 abductions since 1994 up to 2002. As a sample, at least 30 children were abducted in separate incidents in Lamola (Kitgum) and Paimol (Pader) on the 26th January, and on the following day seven children were abducted in Minakulu (Apach district). It seems safe to say that Northern Uganda is the part of world where more people are abducted, even more than the much-publicised case of Colombia

3. The situation on the ground

The violence in Northern Uganda, sometimes referred to as a "low intensity conflict", usually takes on the pattern of a continuous daily trickle of ambushes, abductions, attacks on IDPs, etc, plus some brutal massacres of civilians from time to time. A journalist who visits the area every few months is likely to see and hear the same stories over and over again, something which probably accounts for the lack of interest of the international public opinion in this rather "monotonous" conflict.

January 2004, as it was the case at the beginning of last year, has started with a lot of violent incidents, some of them unreported in the media: The LRA has attacked displaced camps in Namokora (1st January, one killed) and Pabbo (7th January, five killed), it has ambushed vehicles in Dure (2nd January), Namokora (13th) and Pajule (15th), usually with some of their occupants being killed or seriously injured. Eighteen civilians were killed by the rebels in Otuke county in Lira on the 14th, even though the official version is that "the rebels have been flushed out of Lango. One week later, on the 21st, 22 more civilians were killed in Igwenya (Lira district) by rebels as they were going to collect food from their villages. Pitched battles between the LRA and the UPDF have taken place in Opatte (5th January), Orom (7th), Omiya Pacwa (11th) and South of Atanga (19th , when LRA top commander Tolbert Nyeko was killed), with many victims. Also, on the 25th January the rebels ambushed an Army vehicle killing two soldiers and a Major on the Pader-Kalongo road. On the 26th they attacked Minakulu (Apac district) and killed one person.

At present, even though the security situation has improved in Teso, there are still more than one million displaced persons in Northern Uganda.. Thousands of night child commuters continue to be a common sight in the towns of Gulu and Kitgum. As if this was not enough, there is an increasing pattern of indiscipline by the local tribal militias created by the Government in Teso and Lango against the civilian population. There are founded fears that these militias may become a breeding ground for tribal hatred against the Acholis.

Also, in recent weeks, the Army in Kitgum has been telling people in some of the displaced camps that all remaining villagers living in their homes must vacate them or face the risk of being considered as rebels after the 17th January when the Amnesty would expire (never mind if the Government knew that it was going to be finally extended, as it has been the case). We know of at least these recent cases: seven civilians in Palabek, one in Lacekocot and one in Kalongo who have been shot dead by the Army when found outside the IDPs going to collect food in their original villages.

A reason for serious concern is the fact that a good number of rebels who have surrendered

(most of them abductees and many surely under age) do not find their way to any of the reception centres, but are been forced in different ways to join the Army.

In recent weeks we have received reports of groups of rebels (in Lamola, Kitgum and Kalongo) who send messages saying that they were willing to surrender under the terms of the Amnesty, and the Army responded by attacking them.

4. The role of the international community

In contrast with other conflicts worldwide, the war in Northern Uganda has never attracted much international attention until recently. It has been said that this could be attributed to the fact that the conflict takes place in an area without any particular commercial or economic interests. Moreover, events in neighbouring zones, such as South Sudan, the DRC or Rwanda have always overshadowed our area.

There is no doubt that the visit of the UN under-secretary Jan Egeland marked a shifting point. As an immediate result, UN is in the process of opening new offices in Gulu, Kitgum and Soroti, managed by international staff, and is also increasing its humanitarian aid. This, together with the interest of the European Union in the laying down of a "roadmap to peace" in Northern Uganda (much supported by Germany and Italy, apparently opposed by Britain), could become signs of real hope for a peaceful end to this war that has entered in its 18 years of existence. Most people in Acholi, particularly leaders of the civic society who have been involved in peacebuilding initiatives, are absolutely convinced that the war will not end without a serious involvement of the international community, as it has been the case in so many other conflicts throughout Africa and elsewhere. The Ugandan Government has always been reluctant to accept any kind of international intervention in this conflict, which they always describe as a mere "internal affair" which they could manage with their own capacity. As it is already the case, the more the international community shows interest in the Northern Uganda war the more the Government will publish information aimed at minimising the problem, as it is the case now.

The role of the United States remains ambiguous. On one hand they pour money in Northern Uganda for peace projects while on the other hand they provide military assistance whose extend is difficult to assess.

Part of this international picture is the forthcoming peace agreement in Sudan, which may have a positive influence in events in our region. Nevertheless, many questions remain about how security arrangements in South Sudan will be put in place and whether there will be soon a complete end in the supply of weapons and ammunition to the LRA. So far, the promises of the Sudanese Government have never matched their actions, and it has never cooperated in facilitating contacts in its own territory between the LRA and any delegation from Northern Uganda.

5. The rationale of a negotiated solution. Obstacles.

The average person in Acholiland these days, confronted with the question of how the war should end, will most likely say that a peaceful negotiation is the best option. There are different reasons why most Acholis favour peace talks: skepticism about military solutions (something learned from experience), the Acholi traditional culture which favours reconciliation (mato oput) and the fact that most LRA rebels are abductees and obviously people would rather see their own children come back home peacefully instead of being killed.

Nobody denies that such a peace process is difficult and complicated. The experience of those who have had peace contacts with the LRA during 2002 and 2003 can corroborate that there is a very high degree of mistrust between the LRA and the Government of Uganda and that contacts with the LRA tend to be irregular and to lack concrete proposals.

An additional difficulty that has arisen in recent months is the much-repeated and publicised announcement by the Ugandan Government that it would exclude from the Amnesty the top LRA leaders and that it would issue international arrest warrants for them to be tried by the International Criminal Court. Given the scale of atrocities committed by the rebels, it would appear that any person opposing this initiative is suspected to approve or at least to condone their crimes. However, the reasons for opposing the prosecution of the LRA High command have rather to do with the practicalities of luring them into peace negotiations. Nobody can convince a rebel leader to come to the negotiating table and at the same time tell him that when the war ends he will be brought to trial. This is why local actors who have been involved in these peace contacts feel uneasy about the fact that the Government is showing them as the living proof that it is committed to a peaceful negotiation and at the same time announcing measures that will close the door to such peaceful outcome.

Moreover, even though the Amnesty has finally been extended on 17th January 04, although this time only for a three-month period, the message has gone through and it has already discouraged a good number of prospective rebels who would have chosen to lay down their arms, and it has instilled fear in many others who have benefitted from the Amnesty in recent months. To keep the path leading to the negotiating table open and without any obstacles is a most needed factor in achieving a sustainable peace in the near future.

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